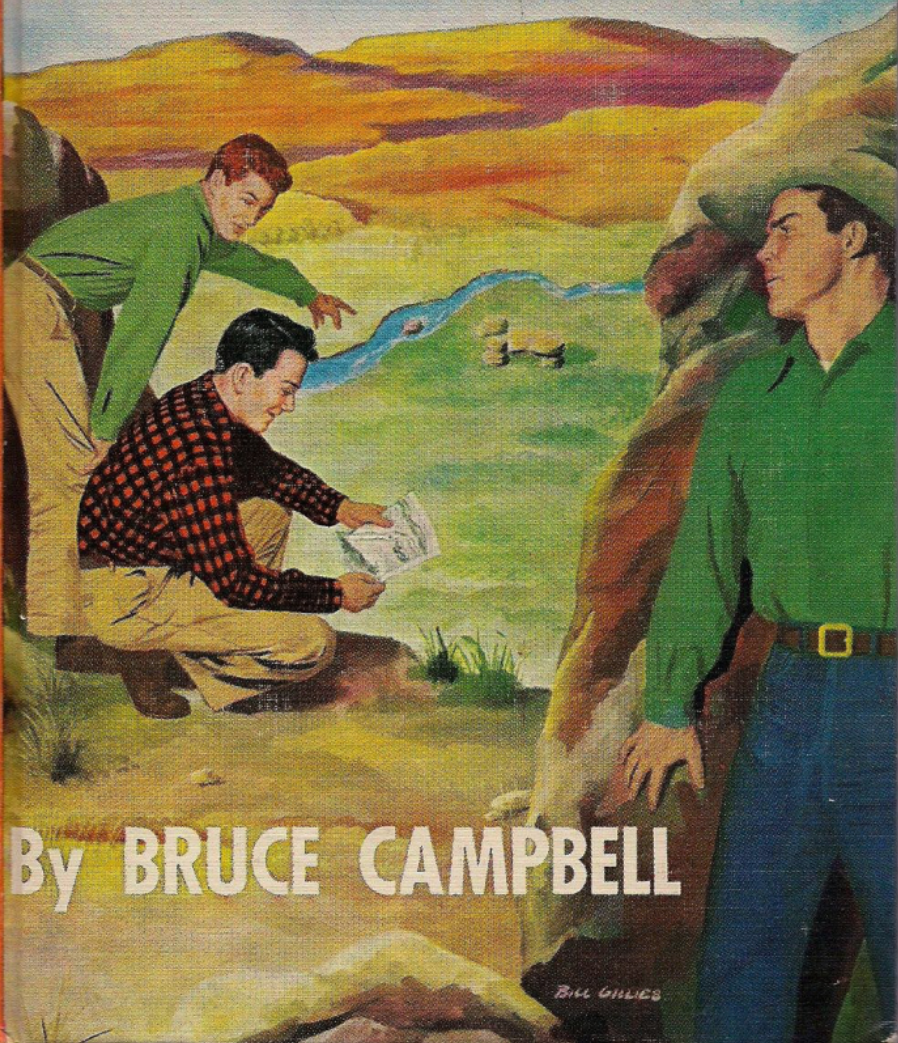


A KEN HOLT Mystery

THE RIDDLE OF THE STONE ELEPHANT



By **BRUCE CAMPBELL**

BILL GILLIES

The Riddle of the Stone Elephant

A KEN HOLT Mystery

By Bruce Campbell

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers*
New York

The KEN HOLT Mystery Stories

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CHAPTER I

A MIXED WELCOME

The sleek new red convertible, its top down, purred smoothly over the crest of the long hill and dipped its hood for the descent. Before Sandy Allen could ease off the accelerator, the speedometer needle brushed past the seventy-mile mark and then dropped to sixty as the powerful engine acted as a brake.

Sandy shot a quick glance at his companion, Ken Holt, who was slouched comfortably on the soft leather seat. "Want to take her the rest of the way in?"

Ken turned and grinned. "Not me. Driving down Pike's Peak this morning was enough."

"That was a cinch." Sandy laughed. "You should have driven up."

Ken slouched even lower in the deep seat to get his head out of the slip stream. "Why should I drive up that mule trail when my two-hundred-pound muscle-bound pal offers to do it?" He shook his head. "I know when I'm well off—with you at the wheel I don't have a thing to worry about."

"Oh, no?" Sandy raised his eyebrows. "Seems to me you had plenty to worry about the last time I drove you around."

The words sent Ken's thoughts back a month to the time he had first met the Aliens. There were Sandy, his older brother Bert, and Pop Allen—all giants and all redheaded. And there was tiny, motherly Mrs. Allen, whose word was law in everything but the operation of the Allen newspaper, the *Brentwood Advance*. Ken's face grew grim as he remembered the breath-taking hunt he and Sandy had made for Ken's father, the famous foreign correspondent, Richard Holt, when Holt's nose for news had led him into deadly danger. He had been rescued from it only when the boys had solved "The Secret of Skeleton Island."

But it hadn't all been bad, Ken remembered. He'd found some friends; the Allen household had virtually adopted him, and had become, in a sense, the first real family he had known since his mother's death some years before. After that event, Holt's far-flung assignments had made it necessary for Ken to live in boarding schools.

But from now on he would live with the Aliens, and already it seemed as if he and Sandy were brothers. This vacation they were taking together in the Rockies was a joint present from Ken's father.

They were going to do a little work, too, while they were out there—a little digging for material for a feature story Richard Holt was to write about a twenty-year-old Colorado land feud. But they would both enjoy that, and in a week, when Ken's father joined them and finished the job, they'd all have the rest of the month for loafing and fishing. It was going to be a good lazy summer, despite its exciting beginning, Ken thought.

As the car reached the top of a climb Sandy whistled. "Look at that!" He pulled off to one side of the road and stopped. Stretched out before them was a magnificent valley at least twenty-five miles across. And at the far end, their peaks almost out of sight in the clouds, stood a wall of mountains as if to block all exit. Even though it was early July the upper slopes were still covered with snow.

"Here," Ken said after a moment.

Sandy turned to find Ken offering him a camera—a beautifully designed 35-millimeter job that had enough gadgets to satisfy even Sandy. He took it absently and turned to get out of the car before he realized that Ken was laughing at him.

"Go ahead—laugh your head off. Just because you have no appreciation of beauty—"

"I can take beauty," Ken said. "But in reasonable amounts. I'll bet this is the fiftieth mountain shot you've made—and they'll all look alike when you develop them."

"Phooey!" Sandy bent over the camera to attach a filter. With his eye glued to the finder, he swept the horizon until he found the view that pleased him best. His index finger pressed the shutter release gently.

"O.K.," he said, when he was back in the car again. "But I hope you're used to this by now. I've brought twenty rolls of film with me—not counting two of infrared."

Ken groaned. "And I suppose you'll spend half of every night under a blanket developing what you took during the day."

"Check!" Sandy said cheerfully. "And you can help." He slowed the car down as they passed a small village, "Where are we?"

"Wait a minute." Ken bent over the map, following the road with a pencil. "Here we are. We go almost to the base of those mountains and then turn north." He began to compute the mileage. "About seventy-five miles, I make it."

"Less than two hours." Sandy looked at his wrist watch. "We ought to be in Mesa Alta by five." He grinned. "Just in time for supper, I hope."

“Did you read those notes Dad gave us?” Ken asked, ignoring Sandy’s comment.

Sandy nodded. “I looked them over.” He shrugged. “Sounds like a simple enough case to me. It’s even happened back East—and land boundaries are older and better known there.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Ken agreed. “But it’s an interesting yarn, anyway. Here are two big ranches, both sharing water rights to a stream. Then one rancher decides to fence in his land and they find that the property line cuts the other ranch out of any water. So what happens?”

“So the other ranch has no water,” Sandy said. “So what? They should have surveyed the property better in the first place.”

“Must have been tough on the one ranch. You can’t raise much stock without lots of water.”

“Well, he took it to court and lost, so I guess there was nothing he could do about it. The funny thing is he’s still mad about it—after twenty years. He didn’t even answer your father’s letter, did he?”

Ken shook his head. “The other man—Raymond— did. But he didn’t sound happy about Dad doing a story, either. Said it would open old scars or something.”

Sandy shrugged. “Well, let’s not worry about it. So far as anybody in town is concerned, we’re just up here for the fishing. When your father comes, it’ll be time enough to figure how to get some co-operation.”

In another half hour they had crossed the valley and the road swung northward. On their left were the huge snow-capped mountains, closer now and more forbidding because of their nearness. On their right, lower hills began to appear as they progressed toward their destination, hills that closed in on them until they were driving at the bottom of a narrow valley. At times it seemed as if they could almost reach out their arms and touch either side. Then the valley would widen until there were five miles between the ranges.

A railroad—a single-track line—appeared suddenly to run beside the road, and when they were still thirty miles from Mesa Alta, a small river joined them. It ran first on one side of the highway and then on the other, crossing beneath the concrete like a winding snake.

They could see the sun still hitting the tops of the hills, but along the road it was rapidly darkening when they pulled into the little crossroad gas station bearing the sign:

Mesa Alta Gas Station

Ken swung open the door, and was getting out to seek directions when the attendant appeared.

“Howdy,” he said. “What’ll it be?”

Sandy looked at the gasoline gauge on the dashboard. “Might as

well fill it up," he said to Ken. "We could use about ten, I guess."

"Can you tell us how to get to the inn?" Ken asked.

"Sure. This is Main Street crossing the highway here. Follow It left about half a mile." He shut off the nozzle as the tank filled, and replaced the gas cap.

"Say!" he said a moment later as he counted out the change into Sandy's hand. "You must be the two reporters who are going to write up a story about the old Wilson land case."

Ken and Sandy exchanged a quick glance.

"My father's going to do the writing," Ken replied. "We just came out for a vacation while he does the story."

"Yep. Remember now. Mrs. Purdy was talking about it over at the post office the other day." He leaned comfortably against the car.

"Quite a case that must have been."

"Do you remember it?" Ken asked.

"No. I'm not old enough for that. I must have been about six when it happened. My father used to talk about it, though. He always said that if it had happened ten years earlier there'd 'a' been shooting over it. Guess people were too civilized by the time the trouble started." He chuckled. "Never can tell, though. Some of the looks Wilson gives Raymond make me glad men don't tote guns any more." He stepped back from the car. "Well, be seeing you around, I guess."

They found the inn without trouble. Its neat white sign swung gently from a huge cottonwood whose branches seemed to spread over the entire width of the roadway.

MESA ALTA INN Mrs. *John Purdy, Prop.*

Sandy swung the car into the wide driveway and drove slowly up the grade and around the house several hundred feet back from the road.

"Looks pretty nice," Ken said.

The building was only one story high, and the eaves extending several feet beyond the rough white walls helped give it a low, comfortable appearance. A porch ran all around, and a barn and several sheds partially enclosed almost an acre behind the house.

Just as the car stopped, one of the several back doors opened and a woman came toward them. She was tall and thin, and her hair was gray, but there was no sign of age in her walk or in her handshake.

"I'm Ma Purdy," she boomed in a nasal voice that bounced off the walls of the buildings and came back at them hardly diminished in volume. "You must be Ken Holt and Sandy Allen." She stood off a pace and looked them up and down. "Now, let's see. Which is which?"

"I'm Ken Holt, Mrs. Purdy."

"Never mind that Missus, son. Call me Ma like everybody else." She turned toward Sandy. "That makes you Sandy, I reckon." She laughed

loud and cheerfully. "There sure is a lot of you, son, isn't there?"

Sandy grinned right back at her. "Just wait until you see what I can do to a tableful of food, Mrs. Purdy ... I mean Ma. Maybe you'll be sorry there is so much of me."

"Nothing I like better than seeing a man eat." She reached inside the car and lifted one of their bags—the fifty-pound one full of Sandy's photographic equipment—swinging it out as if it were a ten-pound sack of potatoes.

"Here," Sandy said, taking it from her. "Let me carry that."

"I've toted heavier things than that, son." She reached for another of the suitcases on the back seat but Ken got there first.

"We'll go in this way," she said over her shoulder as she strode toward the house. "I'm going to put you in the corner room—it's the biggest, and there's no one else staying here now, anyway. When's your father coming?" she asked Ken.

"About a week, I think."

"Good. I'll save the room next to yours for him."

She stepped up on the porch and led the way to the far end of the building. There was a door there which she opened.

They entered a huge room with a low ceiling. It was almost twenty feet square and two of its walls were pierced by windows. There were two chests of drawers, a large table that served as a desk, two leather-covered easy chairs, and several straight ones. In the far corner there were two beds with colorful Mexican spreads.

Mrs. Purdy pointed to a door. "That's your bath. When your father comes you two can share it with him. This other door leads to the hall and to the rest of the house." She thought a moment. "We don't have many house rules around here. No formality at all. Breakfast is at eight, dinner at one, and supper at six. But if you get hungry in between those times, I'll show you where the refrigerator is."

When she was half out of the room she turned to speak again. "Supper'll be a mite late tonight, so when you get settled come on out in the kitchen. There might be a hot biscuit lying around loose."

"That's a woman after my own heart," Sandy said. "She knows what food is meant for." He smiled. "I'll have to write Mom about this right away. She was worried about us not getting enough to eat."

"Let's put our stuff away," Ken said, "and then meet the rest of the establishment."

Fifteen minutes later they wandered out into the hall, which seemed to split the house in two lengthwise, and finally found themselves in a kitchen occupying the entire width of the building at the end near the driveway. Mrs. Purdy was busy at a great electric range. She pulled the oven door open and disclosed several biscuit tins.

"Not quite ready yet." She swung around to face them. "Tell you

what. You've got another half hour of light. Why don't you take a run over the old Narrow Gauge Road. It'll take you past the Sleeping Indian, Camel Rock, Eagle Rock, and the Elephant Rock. You can see the Needle from there, too."

"Where is it?" Ken asked.

"Why is it called the Narrow Gauge Road?" Sandy wanted to know.

"It's on the other side of town—across the highway. And it's called the Narrow Gauge Road because the old railroad used to run there before the wide gauge came through some time back."

The door to the outside banged open just then and a small, wiry man in blue denims came through carrying an armful of groceries.

"Here you are, Ma. I think I got everything."

"Thanks, Bowleg." Mrs. Purdy turned back to the boys. "This is Bowleg Watson—Bowleg for short. He's been around here so long we couldn't manage without him." She turned to Bowleg. "These are the boys—Ken Holt and Sandy Allen. The big one's Sandy."

"Howdy." Bowleg walked forward and shook their hands.

He couldn't have been much taller than five feet four inches even in the high-heeled boots he wore. Though he was obviously well over middle age, his weather-beaten face was unwrinkled and there was lots of muscle in the small frame.

"I was telling the boys they ought to take a look at our famous rocks while it's still light," Mrs. Purdy said.

Bowleg's grin showed a gap where several of his teeth were missing. "Sure. Go ahead. If you've got enough imagination you can see any kind of rock you want to back there. Why, just the other day I saw two new stallion rocks, three cow rocks, and a little cow-pony rock. Just as plain as day."

"Go along with you, Bowleg. You're never going to admit those rocks look like anything."

"What about Elephant Rock and the Needle?" Ken asked. "Is there any doubt about those?"

The grin vanished from Bowleg's face instantly, and the friendly eyes narrowed. "They're there," he said curtly. Then he turned and stalked from the room.

CHAPTER II

THE NEEDLE AND THE ELEPHANT

Ken and Sandy stared blankly after the stiffly retreating figure of Bowleg.

“Pshaw!” Ma Purdy muttered. “I forgot to warn you. That’s the one thing Bowleg’s not good-natured about —the Wilson case. Elephant Rock and the Needle are Wilson’s boundary markers, you know. Bowleg won’t even talk about it. He still thinks after all these years that Raymond cheated Chet Wilson, and no court decision is going to make him think otherwise.” She busied herself again at the stove.

“If everybody always knew where the boundary was, how did the disagreement ever happen?” Ken asked.

Ma sighed. “Well, you see nobody bothered much about boundary lines twenty years back. Cattle just wandered around and ranged where they wanted to. Come roundup time, they were all sorted out and each outfit got its own. But when Raymond bought up the old Wright ranch, after Wright died, he decided to put up fences. That’s when they found the line cut the Wilson place out of water.”

“What made him fence his land?” Sandy asked.

“He began to raise pedigreed beef cattle—animals too valuable to be allowed to roam loose.”

“Didn’t Wilson have any water at all then?”

“A little creek—not near big enough for all his stock.”

“But couldn’t they have come to some sort of an agreement?” Ken wondered.

“Lots of people thought so. But by the time the lawsuit was finished they were both pretty stiff-necked.” Ma bent down to look at the oven thermometer. “Sometimes I wonder if these newfangled gadgets are worth the trouble.”

“Let’s go take a look at the road,” Ken suggested.

“O.K.”

“Go across the highway and down Main Street to the first street on your left,” Ma directed. “Don’t worry about those old railroad tunnels the road goes through. They may look dangerous, but they’ve been

there a long time without caving in.”

Ken took the wheel and drove slowly down the lane and into the street. They turned right toward the highway, Ken holding their speed down to keep the dust clouds from billowing up too thickly behind them.

“Calling this a street is a joke,” Sandy said as they reached the paved-through route. “Counting the inn, there are four houses on it.”

“Maybe there are more on the other side of the highway,” Ken said.

He crossed past the gas station, and proceeded down the main street of Mesa Alta which constituted almost the entire town. There were two gas stations, a grain elevator, a farm equipment and hardware store, a general store, and a drugstore. The post office shared a small building with a tiny motion picture theater.

“According to the sign at the corner there are two hundred people here,” Ken said.

“I wonder where they’re hiding.”

“This must be the street.” Ken turned to the left into a narrow, unpaved thoroughfare which soon gave way to a rutted, steeply rising lane. By the time they were a thousand feet beyond the town, they were several hundred feet above it and still climbing.

Sandy turned to look back. “No wonder the railroad abandoned this route. They must have used ten engines at a time on this run.”

To their right was a deep ravine in which the creek roared its way downhill toward the village. Beyond it, sharp crags rose almost perpendicularly to a height of several hundred feet. On their left there was another steep drop to a flat plateau which ran all the way to the highway, clearly visible in the distance.

“Look ahead,” Ken said. “There’s the first tunnel.”

He drove up to it and stopped. It was a low, narrow hole cut right through the hard rock. It wasn’t long and they could see through it easily to the second tunnel not far ahead.

Sandy pointed to the scattered rocks on the floor of the tunnel. “They don’t take much care of it, do they? Look at that big one—it’s the size of a bushel basket. If that came down from the roof of the tunnel, I’m glad I wasn’t inside when it cut loose.”

Ken switched on his lights and nosed the car inside. There wasn’t more than three feet on either side of them, but that was enough space to maneuver around the stones that dotted the floor. The other three tunnels beyond it were in no better condition. Five hundred feet beyond the last tunnel the road ended abruptly—a barbed-wire fence was stretched across it.

“Let’s take a look,” Ken suggested. “This must be the boundary of the Raymond ranch.”

“How do you know?”

Ken pointed toward the highway. "See that rock? That must be the Needle—anyway, it looks like a needle." He pointed to the right, across the ravine, not far from the edge. "That must be the famous Elephant Rock."

Sandy nodded. "It does sort of look like an elephant."

"And the fence," Ken continued, "is right in line with those two rocks—so it must be the boundary." He walked up to the wire and turned toward the ravine. "Let's follow it and see how it fences the Wilson property away from the water."

When they reached the edge they could look down almost fifty feet into the black water below. The fence ran over the edge of the ravine and continued right to the water's edge. Another similar fence began on the far side of the stream and disappeared out of sight over the crest. Fences also ran along the top of the ravine, evidently to keep the cattle from falling over.

"They couldn't use the water here, anyway," Sandy objected. "Not even a mountain goat could climb down those rocks."

"Right. But look back farther." Ken pointed. "The ravine shallows out so much that the creek is flowing right through the field. I'll bet that's where cattle from both ranches used to water before they had fences."

"And now, of course, the Wilson cows can't get at the water." Sandy leaned over the edge to get another look at the stream. "Seems like there's enough water down there for all the cows in Colorado."

"Maybe not in late summer after there's been a long, dry spell."

Sandy looked up at the sky. "There's enough light left to take a couple of shots of the Elephant and the Needle. Let's go."

They had just climbed back into the car, after having taken the pictures, when they heard a noise behind them. A new, large station wagon nosed out of the last tunnel and pulled up. The driver got out.

The man was big—taller than Sandy, and with more fat on him than there should have been. He looked about fifty. His beautifully tailored whipcord trousers were tucked into fancy high-heeled boots, and he wore a wide-brimmed western hat.

"Howdy." The newcomer smiled broadly. "I reckon you're the two boys who are going to write that story." He extended his hand in Ken's direction. "I'm John Raymond."

"I'm Ken Holt," Ken said, "and this is my friend Sandy Allen."

"Glad to know you, boys." Raymond took a silver cigarette case out of his embroidered shirt pocket and lighted a cigarette before he went on. "It was your father who wrote to me, I guess."

Ken nodded. "We're not going to write the story, Mr. Raymond. My father'll do that. All we'll do is maybe go through the old newspaper records to see if we can turn up something he can use."

“Good.” Raymond’s voice was friendly. “Maybe you can get some fishing in while you’re around here. These trout are mighty good eating.”

“We hope to,” Sandy said. “Mr. Holt isn’t here yet and until he gets on the spot we’ll probably do more loafing than working.”

Raymond laughed. “Loafing a little never hurt anybody, son.” He turned back to Ken. “I’m looking forward to meeting your father. Been reading Richard Holt’s dispatches for quite a while. It’ll be a treat to meet a famous newsman like him.”

He dropped the cigarette on the ground and carefully ground it into the dust. “Matter of fact, I feel I sort of owe him an apology. That letter I wrote wasn’t very hospitable. But you see, folks around here are still kind of edgy about that trouble.” He shrugged. “Not many of them, of course, but I’d rather not see a lot of fuss made about the case.”

“Bowleg Watson is one of them,” Ken said.

Raymond looked up and nodded. “And Chet Wilson, of course.” He shrugged again. “But I can’t stop a story being written, so I figured I might as well give you all the help I can. The quicker you get it done, the quicker it’ll be forgotten again. I can help you get all the facts straight, too.”

“That’s nice of you, Mr. Raymond,” Ken said. “You must have a lot of material yourself.”

Raymond nodded. “Quite a bit. Tell you what—why don’t you two drive over to the ranch tonight? I’ll send my foreman over to lead the way. How about half past eight?”

“Sounds fine,” Ken said.

“Good.” Raymond turned to walk back to his car but stopped before he reached it. “By the way, if you want some good fishing, cross my fence and try just below the rapids.” He winked. “But don’t tell anyone about it. It’s my pet spot.”

They watched the big car turn around and vanish into the tunnel.

“Let’s get back to that meal Ma was fixing,” Sandy said. “I’ve got a reputation to uphold in that department.”

“You’ll uphold it, don’t worry.” Ken slid in behind the wheel.

“Hey!” Sandy said. “Look across the ravine.”

Ken turned. There was a figure climbing down the far side toward the water. He was carrying what appeared to be a homemade fishing pole, and despite this handicap he jumped from rock to rock with the sure-footedness of an antelope.

“If the natives fish around here, this must be a good place,” Sandy said, watching the rapid descent.

“Looks like a kid.” Ken squinted in an effort to see better.

“He must be heading for that quiet pool below the last tunnel,”

Sandy said. "Let's drive back and see how he makes out."

Ken swung the car around and pulled up a few feet outside the hole in the rock. Both of them got out of the car and walked over to the ravine's edge to look down. The stranger—he seemed about fourteen—was crossing the stream by jumping from rock to rock, seemingly indifferent to the rushing water that appeared to be reaching for his flying feet.

He was dressed in faded jeans and a faded shirt and wore heavy work shoes. When he reached the safety of the shore he stopped and set a tin can down on the rock beside him. He fished a worm out of the can and baited his hook.

"Hi!" Ken called.

The boy turned quickly, saw the two heads peering down at him, picked up the can of worms and clambered up the side of the hill toward them.

He stood for a moment looking them over.

"Hi," Sandy tried.

"You the ones going to write the story?"

"My father is," Ken began to explain once more, but before he could go on the boy turned and climbed the rocks through which the tunnel was cut. He was over the crest and out of sight before either Ken or Sandy could say a word.

"If that's western hospitality," Sandy said, "I've seen ..."

"That makes the score two to one," Ken cut in. "Bowleg and this kid against us, and Mr. Raymond for us.

"I'd class Raymond as neutral," Sandy muttered. "I wonder what it is about us that scares people."

"Must be that hungry look in your eyes," Ken said, trying to laugh off the incident. "Let's get back to the inn."

But before the car was halfway through the tunnel, Sandy motioned Ken to stop.

"Look at that beautiful shot," he said.

The last rays of the sun were striking the hill ahead, flooding it with golden light, and through the darkness of the tunnel they could see all the other tunnels beyond, each appearing smaller than the one before it.

"It won't take a second," Sandy said. "I'll shoot right from the car."

He stood up and leaned on the windshield as he focused the camera and set the shutter. An instant later he took the picture. But before Ken could get the car into low gear there was a dull, rumbling noise that grew in volume, and as the boys watched the far opening of the tunnel a huge boulder flashed across it to land on the roadway and shatter into a thousand pieces. Following it came a shower of loose rock that sent up billowing clouds of dust to dance in the reddish light

of the setting sun. Stunned, the boys watched the swirls spin around and around until the mouth of the shaft was almost obscured. The noise of the crash, echoing and re-echoing in the narrow passage, finally died away.

At last Ken spoke. "After this," he said, and his voice was hoarse, "you can take all the pictures you want to with no complaints from me. If we hadn't stopped for that shot, we'd have been under that rock when it fell!"

CHAPTER III

THE SEARCHED ROOM

"This is a fine time to talk about pictures," Sandy said. "Let's get out of here before the whole thing caves in."

Ken let out the clutch and eased the car forward until it was within fifteen feet of the mouth of the tunnel. There he stopped.

"I'm going to walk outside to make sure nothing else is coming down. You drive it out when I give you the all clear."

"O.K." Sandy slid over behind the wheel. "But run— don't walk."

Ken paused an instant just inside the tunnel, and then dashed through the opening. Not until he was fifty feet outside, did he stop and turn around. He looked up at the towering rock, scanning it rapidly but carefully for any signs of motion. For an instant his glance froze as he inspected the pinnacle. Did he see something moving there? Then, satisfied, he waved his arm.

Sandy slid the car ahead until the radiator was out in the open, and then he gave it the gun. The rear wheels threw loose gravel twenty feet behind as the tires fought for a hold; the car shot out into the open, plowing through the soft debris like a rocket. He stopped beside Ken.

"Get in. Let's see if we can get through the other tunnels without getting tapped on the head."

Neither of them said a word until the last tunnel was behind them.

"Ma Purdy and her safe tunnels," Sandy snorted. "After this we'll leave the car here and climb over."

"I'm not so sure there's anything wrong with them," Ken said quietly. "After all, the rock came from the outside—not the inside. It might have become loosened by the weather, and got jarred free enough to come down."

"Sure, sure." Sandy swung the car around the corner and onto Main Street. "I suppose the deafening click of the camera shutter loosened it."

"It could have been somebody's foot or hand," Ken remarked.

"Huh!" Sandy swerved the car over to where a curb would have

been if Mesa Alta had bothered installing curbs. "What did you see up there?"

"Nothing I can be sure of," Ken said. "But I did think I saw that boy with the fishing pole." He paused an instant. "And he did climb up over the tunnel, didn't he?"

"Look." Sandy turned in the seat. "You *do* feel all right, don't you? I mean—the altitude's not getting you. You're not weak from hunger?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but ..."

"Crazy! That's the understatement of the week! Will you tell me why a kid we don't know would try and drop a thousand-pound rock on our heads?" Sandy got the car moving once more. The boys were silent during the rest of the ride back to the inn.

As they started to walk across the court toward the house, two figures detached themselves from the deep shadows near the barn and moved across the court in a parallel direction to their own. One of the figures was Bowleg, the other was a stranger, thin and wiry like Bowleg, but much taller.

"Well, we got back all right," Ken called in greeting.

"Just in time for supper," Bowleg answered.

The two men stopped ten feet away from the boys and spoke in a low voice. Ken and Sandy hesitated, not knowing whether Bowleg wanted to introduce them or not. Bowleg talked, and the other man kept his eyes steadily on the boys. It was clear that he was listening to what Bowleg was saying, but it was just as clear that he was inspecting them carefully. A moment later he mumbled something and turned and walked away.

Bowleg turned then, too, and walked toward the kitchen end of the house.

"Whoever that was," Sandy said, as they completed their passage across the court, "he'll certainly know us next time we meet."

When they entered the dining room fifteen minutes later they found it was already occupied by Bowleg, Mrs. Purdy, and a stranger—a middle-aged man, short and stocky.

"We got a new guest while you boys were gone," Ma boomed. "Meet Arthur Smith, boys. This one is Ken Holt, and the big one is Sandy Allen."

"Glad to meet you," Smith said, shaking hands with both boys. "Here for some fishing?"

"Fishing for information," Ma said. "They're digging up material for a story on our famous old land case."

"Writers?" Smith asked. "You look a little young for that."

"It's Ken's father who's the writer," Mrs. Purdy went on as she filled platters with thick slices of rare roast beef. "He'll come out next week. The boys are just going to collect some material."

Ken didn't know whether to be grateful to Ma for doing all the explaining for him, or be annoyed for this wholesale broadcasting of what was really their own private affair.

"Holt?" Smith said questioningly as he began to eat. "Not Richard Holt, by chance?"

"Yes," Sandy said quickly before Ma could answer that, too. "Global News."

"Of course." Smith leaned back and smiled pleasantly. "I've read his stories for years." He looked at Ken more closely. "And you're his son?"

Ken nodded.

Smith picked up his fork again. "I remember reading something about you two in connection with rounding up some criminals."

Ma stopped eating immediately. "Why didn't you tell me you two were detectives?"

"We're not," Ken said quickly. "We just happened to get mixed up in it."

"Too bad," Ma said. "I could use a couple of detectives around here. Seems to me I've been missing a suspicious lot of cookies lately.

'Course," she continued with a wink to Smith and the boys, "there's only me and Bowleg around—and I don't eat cookies, so I've a pretty good idea where they're going."

Bowleg looked up from his plate and grinned. He seemed to have forgotten having been so curt with the boys a short time before.

"Always said, Ma, you should put a lock on the cooky jar."

"Huh!" Ma snorted. "We've never had a lock on anything around here—and I'm not going to start now. I'll just sit by with John's old pistol. That's a fair warning, Bowleg."

When Sandy pushed his chair back from the table .half an hour later, he wasn't sure he could stand up. And he looked at Bowleg with new respect, for the little man had eaten plate for plate with him and seemed no worse for it.

They were seated in the parlor discussing fishing when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Bowleg called.

A man entered, his big-brimmed hat in his hand. "Howdy."

"Howdy," Smith said. And the boys echoed him.

They turned toward Bowleg to make the introductions, but he was just disappearing through the door into the dining room.

"I'm Clint Madden," the stranger said, moving forward into the room and closing the door behind him. "Foreman over at the Crooked Y ranch," he added. "Raymond's outfit."

"Oh," Ken said. "You must have come for us. I'm Ken Holt, this is Sandy Allen, and this is Mr. Arthur Smith."

Madden shook hands with all of them and then leaned negligently against the mantel over the fireplace. "You ready, boys?"

"In a minute," Ken said. "We'd better get sweaters or something."

"That's my idea of a real cowhand," Sandy remarked as he zipped his windbreaker closed. "Nothing fancy about his clothes."

Ken's head emerged from a pull-over sweater. "Nothing fancy about his speech, either. Doesn't waste a word, does he?"

Sandy grinned. "Bowleg sure likes him. He couldn't even stay in the same room."

At the door of the parlor Ken paused. "Go on in and tell him I'll be out in a minute. I just thought of something I want to ask Bowleg."

When Ken returned several minutes later, the three of them walked out into the soft night.

"I'm parked in the drive," Madden said. "Turn your car around and follow me."

At the intersection with the highway, Madden turned left and drove rapidly for about a mile before turning right onto a gravel road. As they swung the corner, the boys could see a neat white sign:

CROOKED Y RANCH

Registered Herefords

"What's the matter, Ken?" Sandy asked. "Cat got your tongue? What did you ask Bowleg?"

"I asked him if that man we saw him with was Chet Wilson. And I asked him if Wilson had a son about fourteen years old."

Up ahead, Madden had swung to the right again into a neatly kept circular driveway well illuminated by floodlights that also disclosed a beautifully designed ranch house. Madden stopped directly in front of it, and Sandy pulled up behind him.

"What did Bowleg say?"

"Yes to both questions. That kid we saw this afternoon was young Tommy Wilson." Ken looked up to see that Raymond had come to the door of his house and was waiting for them. "Come on."

"Welcome to the Crooked Y," Raymond said, allowing them to precede him. "Sit down by the fire—there's a little chill in the air tonight."

The boys sank into deep chairs and looked around the huge room. Polished open beams shone against the rough plaster ceiling, and the walls were hung with pictures of cattle, old rifles and pistols, and several large Navaho rugs. Raymond seated himself between the two boys, and Madden dropped into a chair at the far end of the ten-foot fireplace.

“Well,” Raymond said, “this is stuff I dug out of the files for you.” He indicated a large Manila envelope lying on the table. “I managed to get most of the newspaper clippings about the case, but I don’t think I have all of them.”

“We’ll check the local newspaper files,” Ken said. “They’ll give us what Dad calls local color—what people here thought of the case.”

Raymond laughed ruefully. “I can tell you that in a few words. I was the most hated man around here for years.”

“And it wasn’t Mr. Raymond’s fault,” Madden put in. “After all, he bought the ranch in good faith—he didn’t know what he was getting into.”

Raymond shrugged. “It’s easy to understand Wilson’s feelings. I’d probably feel just as angry if it had happened to me.”

“Didn’t Wilson offer to buy back the land he’d lost?” Ken asked. “You’d both have had water rights then, like it used to be.”

“Why should we sell?” Madden snapped. “We had the law on our side.”

“Clint!” Raymond said. He turned back to the boys and smiled. “I see you’ve got some of the background already. I’d better give you my side of it.” He settled himself a little more comfortably in his chair, and went on almost in Ma’s words to explain why he had fenced in his land when he had bought the old Wright ranch.

“It was when we ran the line that we discovered that the Wilson ranch had no legal rights to the water. When I went over to see Wilson about it—Chet’s father, you know—he hit the roof. I was figuring on coming to some agreement with him, but when he blew up,” Raymond smiled ruefully, “I guess I got sort of peeved too. He said he’d see me in a pretty hot place before he’d give up that land, and I said we’d let a jury decide it.”

“If he’d been half decent about it, we wouldn’t have had any trouble,” Madden added.

“When Wilson lost the case he offered to buy the land, but I was still too mad at having to go to court over it. So I made my offer.” He shrugged. “You know what happened after that.”

“Plenty,” Madden cut in. “It was tough on me and the boys. No one around here would even talk to us— you’d think we had smallpox or something.”

“Relax, Clint,” Raymond said. “That’s all over now.”

“Writing this story won’t help much. It’ll begin again.”

Raymond turned back to the boys. “That’s what I’m afraid of. And that’s why I wasn’t enthusiastic when your father wrote.”

Ken nodded. “I’m beginning to understand your point, now. But if we can get the material we need quickly, we’ll be out of here in a couple of weeks and the town will forget about it again.”

"Until the story is printed," Madden said.

"Take it easy, Clint." Raymond's voice was a little sharp.

"Sometimes Clint's as bad as Wilson, or Bowleg over at the inn."

"Or maybe Wilson's son," Ken said.

"What's that?" Raymond sat up. "Did you meet the boy?"

"Not formally," Ken said, and went on to tell what had happened at the tunnel.

Raymond turned to Madden. "That doesn't make sense, does it, Clint? Why should the boy ... ?" He stopped and shook his head. "No. It's ridiculous. It must have been an accident." He got up to poke the fire, and then turned to chuckle. "Now if it had been me, you'd have good reason to be suspicious. After all, I won the case. But Wilson can't have anything to lose by having a story written at this late date."

Ken walked over to the table and began to untie the string that held the envelope closed.

"You can take that along, if you want to, boys," Raymond said.

"Just try not to lose anything—not that there's anything of legal value in the collection."

"Thanks," Ken said. "We'll be careful."

Sandy stood up too. "I guess we'd better be getting along."

Raymond waved their thanks away. "Think you'll find your way back to the inn?"

"Sure," Sandy said.

"Well," Raymond was walking with them toward the door, "don't forget, the latchstring is always out here at the house—and down where the big ones are in the creek, too."

"We'll take you up on that," Ken said.

"I think he's right about the rock," Sandy said as they drove along. "It makes sense. Wilson has nothing to lose by this story."

"Only his pride," Ken said. "If he's never forgotten the case, he certainly wouldn't like a story about it being spread all over the newspapers from coast to coast."

"That's not enough reason for his son to drop rocks on our heads."

Sandy drove the car into a shed which had been designated as their garage, and they walked across the court to their room.

Ken opened a bureau drawer to get his pajamas, looked inside, and then swung around to Sandy. "Did you go through these notes Dad gave us?" Ken asked.

"Me? No. What for?"

"Well, someone has."

Sandy joined him. "Looks all right to me."

"No, it isn't." Ken pointed to the papers in the drawer. "I put them in neatly. Now look at them."

Sandy nodded. Then he turned and walked across the room to the

big bag holding his camera equipment. He pawed through the contents for a moment before he turned around. "Someone's been snooping in here, too. I can tell by the way the things are packed."

Ken sat on his bed. "Rocks," he said softly, "people who don't want to talk to us, and now snoopers."

Sandy looked at the many windows and shook his head. "I wish Ma wasn't so touchy about locks. I'd feel better if we had some around here."

CHAPTER IV

THE MISSING PICTURE

The boys turned up for breakfast the next morning a little groggy. They had spent a fruitless hour discussing the possible identity of the snooper, and another one looking through the papers Raymond had given them. There hadn't been very much material in the envelope, despite what Raymond had said. They'd pored over the twenty-odd newspaper clippings without adding much to their knowledge of the case, except the verification of what Raymond had told them—that he'd been the most hated man in the region for quite a while.

And when they had finally turned off their light, well past midnight, the unaccustomed sounds of a strange house hadn't helped, either. It was nearly one o'clock before they fell into a troubled sleep.

They made no mention of the disturbed luggage at breakfast, feeling that it would distress Ma without accomplishing anything. And the breakfast itself—thick slices of crisp ham, golden eggs, and stacks of pancakes flowing with honey and butter—went a long way toward dispelling their fears of the night before.

"Where's Bowleg?" Ken asked.

Ma seated herself at the table and poured herself a cup of coffee. "Painting the far side of the barn. What do you boys plan to do today? A little fishing?"

"Sounds good to me." Sandy mopped up the last drops of honey and butter with his eighth pancake.

Ken pushed his chair back and sighed contentedly. "Could you make us a couple of sandwiches, Ma?"

"Sure. I'll fix them while you talk to Bowleg."

They walked out into the brilliant sunshine. Ken breathed deeply. "This is what I call fresh air."

"Clear as a bell." Sandy scanned the horizon. "Bet I could get a close-up of that mountain from here with the telephoto lens." He nodded approvingly. "Not a bit of haze."

"Thought we were going fishing." Ken poked Sandy to get him moving again. "You don't catch fish with telephoto lenses."

“You don’t take pictures with fishhooks, either.” Sandy grinned at him. “I’ll take the camera along, anyway, just in case someone begins to throw stones at us again.”

When they rounded the corner of the barn they saw Bowleg perched on a ladder, swinging a brush lazily against the weathered siding. Noting the shower of red paint that dripped down off the brush, the boys made a wide detour and stopped fifteen feet away.

“Morning.” Bowleg laid the brush across the top of the paint pot and ambled down the ladder, his hands leaving vivid red marks wherever they touched the already well-spattered rungs. “Never could learn to keep the paint where it belonged.” He shrugged. “Shucks. Don’t matter much. Paint’s cheap.”

“Thought we’d do a little fishing,” Ken said. “Ma said you’d give us some advice.”

“Sure. Be glad to.” Bowleg squatted down on his heels and began to roll a cigarette expertly. “Did you bring out a lot of truck like Smith did?” He licked the cigarette paper and sealed the little cylinder, twisting the ends to keep the tobacco from spilling out.

Sandy shook his head. “We figured we could buy whatever we needed out here.”

“Don’t need much. Couple of switches, twenty feet of line, couple of hooks and some worms. We’ve got plenty right here.”

“Thought we’d need some flies,” Ken said.

Bowleg snorted. “That’s what most dudes think. They think they can fool a fish.” He shook his head. “Waste of money. The fish around here will bite if they’re hungry, and if they’re hungry they’ll rise to a worm as well as any of them fancy feathers. If they’re not hungry, they won’t rise to anything.”

Bowleg seemed willing to extend the conversation indefinitely, and again the boys wondered at his sudden changes of mood. When they had last seen him he was stalking out of the room to avoid any conversation with Madden. He had walked away from them when the subject of the land case was brought up. But now all that seemed to have been forgotten.

This was an issue, Ken decided, that had to be settled—if possible. And the sooner the better for all concerned.

Ken squatted down beside the little man. “Look, Bowleg, we want to discuss something with you.”

Bowleg looked directly into Ken’s eyes, the cigarette dangling from his lips. His face had set into hard lines almost immediately. “If it’s about Wilson and Raymond, drop it.”

“We can’t drop it, Bowleg. But we don’t want to keep fighting with you over it.”

“Just don’t bring it up and we’ll get along fine.”

“We’re not doing anybody any harm.” Sandy got down on his haunches, too, but lost his balance and fell over backward.

The little grin that appeared on Bowleg’s face vanished as quickly as it came. “I’m not saying you mean harm to anybody. I’m saying you’ll do no good stirring up a lot of dirt. The Wilsons got swindled out of their water rights. Everybody around here knew that the Wrights and the Wilsons always shared the creek. If Raymond’d been a man, instead of a rat, he’d have gone along no matter where the boundary is. There’s plenty of water in that creek for both ranches.”

“But listen, Bowleg,” Ken was making another attempt to explain their side of the argument, “Wilson can’t be harmed by a story.”

“Chet’s father took a licking in court,” Bowleg went on. “Chet’s doing the best he can—which isn’t very good—considering that he can only run a couple of hundred head of cattle where he should be running thousands. He don’t want this thing brought up again—he don’t want people feeling sorry for him.” Bowleg got to his feet and ground the cigarette butt into the loose soil. “I agree with him, and I’m not helping anybody who’s trying to stir up an old mess.”

Ken stood up to look down at the smaller man. “Helping,” he said quietly, “is one thing. Hindering is another.”

“Huh?” Bowleg looked up quickly. “Hindering? Who’s hindering you?”

“Maybe hindering is the wrong word,” Ken admitted. “But someone sure wants to know what we’ve got in our luggage.”

The displeasure so evident in Bowleg’s manner changed to wonderment. “I don’t follow you, son. What’s this about luggage?”

“Someone searched our room last night.”

“What are you trying to say, son?” Bowleg was speaking very quietly.

“I’m not trying to say anything, except that last night while we were over at Raymond’s place somebody went through our stuff.”

“Who do you reckon did it?”

Ken shrugged. “I don’t know. That’s why I brought this up.” He moved slightly so that he was facing Bowleg once more. “Look at it our way for a second. You freeze up every time anybody talks about the old case. Tommy Wilson walks out on us before we can say more than hello. Mr. Wilson was here talking to you last night. He looked us over as if we were specimens under a microscope—but he wouldn’t even be introduced. It seems pretty clear who *doesn’t* want the story written.”

“That’s enough.” Bowleg snapped the words out, and then he stopped, obviously fighting to control his anger. After a moment he went on, a little more calmly, “This is the kind of mess I’m trying to avoid. Chet Wilson’s been an underdog around here for twenty years.

He gets blamed for everything. If one of Raymond's fences gets torn down, people think Wilson did it. If one of Madden's men quits, people think Wilson's responsible. Now someone goes through your stuff and you think Wilson did it."

"Well, someone did it," Sandy pointed out. "And so far Wilson and you have been the only people around who are against having a story written."

"I suppose Raymond likes the idea, huh?" Bowleg couldn't even say the name without allowing anger to creep into his voice.

"He's not keen about it," Ken said. "But he's offered to help to get it over with as fast as possible."

"We're not going to get anywhere," Bowleg said. "But I'll tell you this much: I didn't search your luggage, and neither did Chet Wilson or Tommy. We don't care what you're carrying around. If anybody did, it was Raymond or Madden."

Ken shook his head. "Couldn't have been. They were with us while it was done."

"Then it was one of their boys. They got a couple up there that we would have run out of town in the old days."

Ken shrugged. "You're right, Bowleg. We're not going to get anywhere. I'm sorry you won't help us, but if you won't ..."

"What about that fishing?" Sandy changed the subject.

"I almost forgot about that." Bowleg seemed relieved. "I'll get you some switches and fix up a couple of lines. I'll meet you at the house in fifteen minutes."

Ken kicked a stone across the packed earth as they headed for the kitchen door. "What do you think?"

"I believe him about his not searching our room," Sandy said. "But how does he know what Chet Wilson or Tommy was doing last night?"

Ken paused a moment before pushing the door open. "That's what I was thinking."

Sandy grinned. "The little bantam sure gets mad, doesn't he? I thought for a moment he'd let fly."

Ken opened the door and they entered the kitchen.

"Good morning," Smith looked up from the breakfast table. He stuck out his leg to let the boys see he was wearing waders. "I'm going fishing. Care to join me?"

"We're not in your class," Sandy pointed to a rod and creel that stood against the wall. "We're the bent-pin and worm boys."

"This'll be a good test of the opposing theories of fishing," Smith finished his coffee and stood up. "We'll see who does better—you with worms or me with flies." He waddled to the door, the big rubber boots flopping around as he walked.

Ma came in then with a huge paper bag. "Here's your lunch."

Sandy hefted the bag. "What's in it? Sash weights?"

"Six sandwiches, a couple of apples and a quart of milk. Think it'll hold you until supper?"

"We can always eat a raw fish if we get hungry, Ma." Ken said.

"I'll meet you outside," Sandy said to Ken. "Bring the camera and the light meter."

Bowleg came toward them as the boys were backing the car out of the shed. He had two slender willow branches and a tin can full of worms. Once again he had made that switch from anger to friendliness. "Here you are. There's about twenty feet of line on each pole. Should be enough. Don't fall in," Bowleg cautioned "Water's pretty swift in those rapids."

"We'll be careful," Ken said. "And thanks."

They drove through the town and out along Narrow Gauge Road, passing through the tunnels warily but without incident. Ken pulled the car to a halt at the fence.

"Should we take advantage of Raymond's offer?" Sandy asked.

"Let's see what's right below us," Ken suggested. "Maybe there's a nice quiet pool right here."

They picked up the poles and the worms and walked to the edge of the ravine.

An hour later, after dozens of casts, Sandy sat down. "Even the fish don't like us." He pointed to a deep pool of slow-moving water about ten feet from the bank. "Look. There he is again."

A huge trout appeared dimly right below Ken's line. He investigated the fat worm on the hook, nudged it gently, and then lazily swam away. Ken pulled up his line and wound it around the pole.

"I give up. I don't feel much like fishing any more." Ken looked back up the wall of the ravine. "Let's go up and take a good look at the Needle and Elephant Rock."

"Absorb some local color? Might as well."

They crawled back up the rocks and went to the car to get rid of their poles. Sandy slung the camera strap over his shoulder and followed Ken to the other edge of the plateau. Not far from them, Needle Rock stood up like a lighthouse.

"Give you any ideas?" Sandy wanted to know.

Ken shook his head. "You?"

"Not a one. Let's go look at the Elephant."

They walked back to the ravine's edge and stared at the pile of stone that formed the other boundary marker.

"Bowleg's got a point," Sandy observed. "It looks a little like an elephant, but if I didn't know its name I might be tempted to call it hippopotamus rock, or some-like that."

"It looks more like an elephant than any other pile of stones around here."

"Guess so." Sandy didn't sound too convinced. "But look at that pile there." He pointed several hundred feet north of Elephant Rock. "If that had a head it would look like an elephant, too."

"But it hasn't got a head," Ken said. "So it's not an elephant." He looked at his watch. "It's almost noon. What say we go into town and do a little snooping in the old newspaper files?"

"What say we eat something first?" Sandy countered.

Half an hour and six sandwiches later they turned the car around and headed back for town.

The office of the *Mesa Alta News* was housed in a wooden building, hemmed in by the hardware store on one side and the drugstore on the other. A small porch, one step above the sidewalk, ran the full width of the building.

Sandy inhaled deeply as he stood before the screened door, sniffing the mixed odors of hot lead and ink drifting out of the opening. He smiled happily. "Smells like home."

Ken pushed open the door and entered the office. There were two desks there and several battered chairs. At one of these old pieces of furniture a middle-aged man sat hunched over an old typewriter, his fingers flying over the keys. From behind the partition a faint clicking told the boys that a linotype machine was in operation.

The man looked up when the door banged shut. He stood up quickly, the desk chair skittering behind him. "Wondered when you two would come in." He came across the littered floor rapidly, his hand outstretched. "I'm Chatham—Bob Chatham—editor, reporter, advertising manager, advertising salesman, and copy boy of the biggest paper in Mesa Alta." He grinned. "The *only* paper."

"I'm ..." Ken began, taking the offered hand.

"I know, I know." Chatham shook Sandy's hand briefly and then indicated the empty chairs. "Sit down. You're Richard Holt's boy and you—the big one—you're Sandy Allen." He recaptured his own chair and dropped into it.

"What we wanted to do," Ken began again, "is ..."

"I know, son. I know. Come on." Chatham jumped to his feet again and almost trotted across the room to a door. "Here they are."

"Here what are?" Ken asked.

"The old files. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?" He left them at the open door and trotted back to his desk. "They're bound in volumes—back to the first issue in 1899. Help yourself to anything you want. There's copy paper in here, and you can use Esmeralda." He gestured vaguely toward an even older typewriter than his own. "She'll complain, Esmeralda will, but she'll write." A second later, his fingers

were beating the keys; he seemed to have forgotten them completely.

Ken looked at Sandy helplessly and then they entered the other room. It faced the front of the building as did the office. Two windows opened on the street, but they were so dusty that it was difficult to see through them. Every bit of usable wall space was taken up by shelves, all of them stacked with tall, canvas-bound volumes of the old issues of the newspaper.

Ken walked down a row of shelves, scanning the dates that were written on the backs of the volumes. "Here's what we're looking for." He pulled one of the large books off the shelf and laid it on a cigarette-scarred table.

Ken opened the cover and began to turn the yellowed pages.

"Here!" Sandy pointed to an item on the first page of an issue dated March 12. The headline read:

STOCKMAN BUYS WRIGHT RANCH

Ken hunched himself over the paper and began to read. "The Wright ranch, in the hands of the executors of the estate since the death of Alf Wright last January, was sold today to John Raymond who plans to operate the property as an up-to-date cattle enterprise. When interviewed yesterday, Raymond stated that his first interest was breed improvement." Ken allowed his voice to trail off. "This is the same story we read last night."

"Natch," Sandy said. "What did you expect? All of Raymond's clippings came from this newspaper."

They went on turning pages. The next story—also one that Raymond had given them—was in the paper of September 17. The headline said:

RAYMOND CLAIMS RANCH WITHOUT WATER RIGHTS

From that date on there was a big story in every issue of the paper. Ken noted down the dates for reference.

"Raymond only has about half the clippings," Sandy said, while Ken was lugging the volume back to the shelf and returning with the one for the following year.

Ken grinned over his shoulder. "I don't blame him— after reading what some of those stories said about him." He hefted the big book into position and opened it. "Good," he said a moment later. "Pictures."

Sandy shrugged. "Just an old shot of the Needle. We took a better one yesterday."

"But this was made at the time of the trial. Things might have looked different then. And here's one of Elephant Rock."

"They look the same to me as they do now. But I can photograph these if you want me to." Sandy unslung the camera from around his neck.

"Wait a minute." Ken shut his eyes. "I'm thinking."

"Must be a painful process, judging from the look on your face."

"How would *you* know?" But Ken sounded absent-minded. "This man Rex Burton who crops up in almost every story—he seems to have been Wilson's best witness. Wonder if he's still alive?"

"Maybe Ma will know."

"If anybody does, she will," Ken agreed. "Well ask her."

He lowered the book to the floor to make it easier for Sandy to make his photographs. Soon they were turning pages again. But there was little more to be found. At the time when the appeal had been heard in a Denver court, there was a small story; and there was another when the final decision had been handed down, but that was all.

Sandy looked at him. "That's that, huh?"

"Wait a minute." Ken scratched his head. "Let's look even further back. Maybe we can find some views of the town as it looked earlier. Might be good for local color or something."

They worked backward, but it wasn't until they had covered the issues for several years that they found a special edition marking the occasion of the first train to pass through Mesa Alta over the new narrow gauge tracks. There was a picture of the train emerging from one of the tunnels, and one of the train against the background of the Sleeping Indian, and—but anything else there might have been was missing; a corner of the page had been torn away.

Ken bent down to read the text. "Too bad. That was a panoramic shot. It might have given us a good overall view."

But when they reached the issue commemorating the fifth anniversary of the founding of the paper, it began to look as if their luck had turned. A bold headline announced that there were two full pages of scenes inside.

"Hey, look!" Sandy exclaimed. "Here's a list of the pictures in the special section."

Ken ran his finger down the list. "Good! Two pictures of Main Street; one of the Sleeping Indian; one of the Needle; a picture of the site of the future railroad showing the tunnels and the partially completed tracks; and another panoramic view. The same one that was torn out, I'll bet."

A moment later they both sat back, disappointed. The bottom of the double page of pictures had been torn away leaving nothing but a bad reproduction of the Sleeping Indian.

"Of all the luck!" Sandy said.

Ken said, "I wonder why the pictures we might be able to use just happen to be missing. Or do they just *happen* to be missing?"

"What do you mean?"

Ken got to his feet and went back to the shelf to inspect the old volumes carefully. "Look, Sandy. They're all covered with dust, but every one of them from the date of the case on has been handled. Look at all the finger marks."

"We just handled them, didn't we?"

Ken pulled one of the books part way out. "I didn't make all these marks. Someone besides us has been at these books recently. Let's ask Mr. Chatham who else wanted to see these old newspapers."

Chatham looked up at their question and thought a moment. "Nobody that I know of. I don't believe anybody's been at them in years." He smiled. "Who'd want to?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Ken said, but he was already speaking to the editor's back. "Let's go, Sandy."

"Come back any time you want to, boys," Chatham called to them without looking around. "We're open all day, and if I'm not around make yourself at home."

"Thanks." Ken allowed the door to close behind them.

"That may account for it," Sandy said. "If the door's always open, how does he know who might have wandered in?"

They were just about to step into the car, when Chatham's voice reached them. "Bill, my linotyper, just remembered that young Wilson was in here a couple of weeks ago looking at the old papers." He waved and let the screen slam. "Thought you might like to know."

CHAPTER V

WHO TORE THE PAGES?

They had been sitting in the car a full minute before Ken spoke. "Tommy again, huh?"

"Wait a minute," Sandy protested. "You're jumping to conclusions too fast for me. Suppose Tommy did look at the old papers. Does that mean he tore the pictures out? They might have been torn years ago when someone else looked at them. You saw how brittle the paper was."

"Hmm." Ken sat up straighter. "You've got something there. Maybe we can tell if the pages were torn recently." He got out of the car quickly. "Bring the binoculars," he said over his shoulder.

Chatham looked up from his desk questioningly as they banged into the office.

"We want to take another look at the files," Ken said, and when Chatham nodded, the boys went through the office into the file room. Ken took the proper volume off the shelf and laid it on the table near the window.

"Here," he said, when he'd found one of the torn pages in the anniversary issue. "Give me the binoculars."

He took them and unscrewed the front lens from one of the tubes. "This makes a good magnifying glass." He hauled the book close to the window and then carefully examined the torn edge of the paper.

When he looked up after a moment, he was smiling. "Take a look and tell me what you think."

Sandy bent low over the page. When he looked up he had a puzzled expression on his face. "I'm no expert, of course, but it seems to me that if the tear was old, the edge would be as yellow and faded as the face of the sheet. The torn edge here," he pointed to the page, "is white. Could be it was torn not too long ago."

Ken nodded. "Maybe only a couple of weeks ago."

"But why?" Sandy replaced the lens on the binoculars. "That's what I want to know—*why!*"

"My brilliant deductive abilities," Ken said, grinning, "tell me that

the easiest way to find out is to ask young Wilson."

Sandy snorted. "You have to get a butterfly net to catch him first."

"Then we'll go back and put it up to Bowleg. Maybe we can convince him to take us up to the Wilson place to talk about it."

"That'll be the day," Sandy said.

They found Bowleg still painting the barn. He was, by this time, practically covered with the paint he was splashing about so freely.

"Any luck?" He climbed down the ladder.

"Luck?" Ken looked puzzled.

"Catch any fish?" Bowleg wiped his hands on a rag that looked as if it had been soaking in the paint pot for days.

"Not a bite," Sandy said. "How'd Smith make out?"

"Him and his fancy flies," Bowleg said. "Not a nibble."

Ken got to the point. "We have to talk to you again."

"I told you," Bowleg said, "that I didn't ..."

"Just listen to us for a minute."

For an instant it looked as if Bowleg were going to explode, but then he grinned unexpectedly and said to Sandy, "Stubborn, ain't he?" He turned back to Ken. "Shoot."

It didn't take Ken a minute to tell his story.

Bowleg thought a moment, thoughtfully chewing on a weed while he pondered. "Tell you what," he said finally. "I'd say that if Tommy wanted to look over the old papers it's none of your business. Maybe *he* wants to write a story too."

"Sure," Sandy agreed. "But does he have to tear out the pictures?"

"That's something I'm not believing until I hear Tommy admit it. That kid was brought up right—he doesn't destroy things that don't belong to him."

"Listen, Bowleg," Ken said. "If we could just talk to the Wilsons for a couple of minutes, we could probably clear up a lot of things. Why don't you ask them if we can see them?"

Bowleg put a hand on the ladder to go back to work. "I'll probably not get any peace around here until you do see them," he said. "O.K. I'll ask Chet tonight. If he says he's willing to talk to you, I'll take you over there." When he was halfway up he turned to look down at them. "But if he says no, don't go there alone. He's got a dog that don't like strangers."

Back in their room the boys stretched out on their beds, tired from the hours of bending over the old volumes in the office of the *News*, and even more fatigued from lack of sleep.

Sandy yawned. "We got more rest hiding on that freighter than we're getting here."

"I feel safer here," Ken said. "Nobody's chasing us."

"Yet." Sandy got up and walked across the room to unload the film

in the camera. "Ever since you came into my life I've been short of sleep."

"Too bad about you." Ken sat up on the bed. "Must be getting near time for supper. I'm going to take a shower."

Ma's voice cut through the door without any reduction in volume. "Ken ... Sandy? You two in there?"

"Sure, Ma. Come on in." Sandy walked toward the door.

"Just thought of something I forgot to tell you yesterday." She came into the room a couple of feet. "You know Chatham didn't always own the *News*. Used to belong to Willie Buck—died about fifteen years back. Mrs. Buck sold the paper to Chatham."

The boys wondered what all this was leading up to, but they didn't have long to wait to find out.

"Mrs. Buck's been out in California visiting her daughter," Ma went on, "but when she comes back in a couple of days you ought to go up and talk to her. She's probably got a lot of stuff up in her attic you'd like to look over. I'll tell you when she arrives." Ma caught sight of the traveling alarm clock the boys had set on the table between the beds. "Look at the time— and me with supper to get."

Bowleg's conversation during supper was devoted solely to sarcastic remarks about fishing with flies and lures—a lot of good-natured banter that Smith seemed to enjoy, and which he answered effectively by pointing out that the boys hadn't done any better with worms.

As soon as the dishes were cleared away, Bowleg left the house. Smith sank into a deep chair in the living room, and the boys went to their room.

Sandy yawned. "If we're going to see Wilson, we'd better do it fast."

Ken sat himself at the table to write a letter. "Maybe you'd better develop that film—might keep you awake."

"Too tired." But Sandy couldn't quite resist the lure, and after a moment he went into the closet, closing the door behind him.

"Hey!" he called. "Put that light out."

"I never learned to write in the dark," Ken answered, but he turned off the light.

"O.K." Sandy called. "Turn it on again." He came out of the closet. "It's dark enough in there to load the tank if there's no light in the room."

Ken sighed. "So that means I have to sit in the dark."

Sandy grinned at him. "Well, you suggested this."

"Someday," Ken said, "I'll learn to keep my big mouth shut."

"That I want to see." Sandy ducked to avoid the chair cushion Ken threw at him. "Better ..."

A knock on the door cut him off short.

"Who is it?"

“Me—Bowleg.”

Ken swung the door open. “Come on in.”

“We better get moving,” Bowleg said, standing in the doorway. “Chet said he’d talk to you.” He waited while the boys got into windbreakers. “We’ll go in my car—road’s none too good.”

They squeezed into his battered old Model A, barely getting the door closed before he started off.

“Chet don’t see much sense in this trip,” Bowleg shouted over the noise of his clattering vehicle, “but I told him he might as well get it over with.”

“Did you tell him about the newspapers?” Ken asked.

“Nope. Figured you two could do all the talking.”

He drove down Main Street, and turned left into the steeply rising street parallel to Narrow Gauge Road, but one block beyond it. It soon became a narrow niche cut out of the rocks, and in places it seemed as if it wasn’t quite wide enough to accommodate the car.

Bowleg stopped after they had left the town five minutes behind. “Know where you are?”

The boys looked past him out of the car. The darkness was intense—made even more so by the sprinkling of lights that shone far below.

“See—down to the left. That’s Main Street.” Bowleg’s arm, a dull blur, moved in an arc toward the right. “Those lights—that’s the Raymond ranch house.” He shut off the motor, and in a moment the silence closed around them like a heavy blanket. Then, as their ears grew accustomed to the lack of sound, they could hear the rumble and roar of Elephant Creek somewhere below them.

“Where is it?” Sandy asked.

“Right close by.” Bowleg grinned. “Only about three hundred feet away.”

“That close?” Ken tried to peer through the windshield.

Bowleg laughed. “Not that way. Straight down.”

“And no guard rail,” Sandy muttered. “Let’s get going.”

In another hundred feet they had turned into a flat field and not five hundred feet away they could see several yellow points of light. In less than a minute Bowleg had stopped the car.

Before he could get the motor turned off, they heard the patter of feet and a deep-throated growl. Eyes gleamed like miniature headlights in the blackness.

“Quiet, Boy!” Bowleg opened the door on his side and got out, to scratch the head of a dog that looked about the size of a pony. “He’ll be all right as long as I’m here. But don’t make a sudden move.”

Gingerly, the boys eased themselves out of the car to stand beside Bowleg while the dog inspected them carefully.

Bowleg hooked his fingers under the dog’s collar. “Let’s go.”

They waited on the sagging porch, after Bowleg had knocked, until the door creaked open to disclose a tall, thin woman in a faded house dress.

” ‘Evening, Mildred.’ Bowleg let go of the dog and moved forward.

” ‘Evening.’ She looked at the boys and then turned and disappeared down a dimly lighted hall.

Bowleg motioned the boys inside. “Used to be the prettiest girl in the valley—before the trouble.”

He closed the front door and crossed the small vestibule toward a door which he opened and allowed the boys to pass through. They found themselves in a large room furnished with shabby chairs and an old table, and lighted by a kerosene lamp hanging from a hook in the ceiling. Seated at the table was Chet Wilson, and standing near him was Tommy.

” ‘Evening.’ Wilson got to his feet.

“Good evening,” the boys answered, and then they stopped while the silence grew uncomfortable.

Wilson broke it. “Bowleg says you want to talk to me.”

Ken nodded. “You see ...”

Wilson interrupted. “Don’t know as there’s much to talk about. Bowleg gave you our side of it.”

“But ...” Ken tried again.

Wilson kept right on as if Ken hadn’t tried to say anything. “You know what happened—and you know we got licked. I know—and everybody around here knows—that no matter where the boundary is, Wright and my father agreed to share the water rights.” He smiled bitterly. “Seems like we were wrong. So we get along the best way we can. We don’t want this story dragged up again. We want to be let alone.” He picked up a pipe from the table and got it going.

Ken cleared his throat. “Nothing we could dig up for the story could do you any harm, Mr. Wilson.”

“All the harm’s been done already.”

“Maybe we might find something that would help.”

Wilson looked at Ken over the cloud of smoke. “Like what?”

“Well, I ...” Ken floundered. “Maybe ...”

“Look, son, there’s something you ought to get straight.” Wilson seemed to lose some of his truculence —his voice took on the more gentle tones of advice rather than defiance. “I read about what you and your friend here did last spring. I reckon you’re pretty smart lads—but there’s no need for detecting around here. If my father and Wright had been a little more careful about the boundary markers, there wouldn’t have been any trouble. The boundary’s right—it has to be. It says so right in the deed. The line runs from the Needle to Elephant Rock, and in a straight line for near a mile.”

He stopped to knock the ashes out of his pipe. "And the Needle and Elephant Rock are right where they always were." He shrugged his shoulders. "All we tried to prove at the trial is that Wright and my father intended to share the water rights. Pretty hard to prove what's in a man's mind after he's dead, I guess."

Bowleg spoke up for the first time. "If Wright were alive at the time of the trial he'd 'a' told Raymond off."

"But he wasn't." Wilson turned to look Ken in the face. "So you see, I'm not interested in your story—not at all. I can't stop it, but I'm not going to help."

"If you're not interested," Ken said, "why did your son go through the back issues of the newspaper?"

"What's that? Tommy went through the old papers?" Wilson swung around to look at his son. "Did you?"

The boy nodded.

"Why?"

Tommy looked down, unable to meet his father's eyes. He fidgeted with a button on his shirt. "When we got that letter from his father," he pointed to Ken, "I thought maybe I could find out something if I looked through the old papers. I thought maybe ..."

"You heard what I told them," Wilson broke in. "There's nothing you can find out that would do us any good. You stay away from those papers—stay away from anything like that. Understand?"

"Yes." The boy dropped his eyes again.

"Look," Sandy said, sorry for having been even partly responsible for the scene, "he didn't do any harm, Mr. Wilson."

"I'll be the judge of that," Wilson said sharply.

"Didn't find anything, anyway," Tommy mumbled.

"You must have, Tommy." Ken spoke quietly and directly to the youngster as if there were no one else in the room.

Tommy shook his head. "Nothing I didn't know."

"Then why," Ken asked, "did you tear one of the pictures out of the old papers?"

Tommy looked up, surprised. "I didn't tear anything out."

Ken couldn't doubt the sincerity in the boy's voice. He tried to get his thoughts together—he'd been so sure that the boy ...

Tommy was talking again. "I know what you mean," he said. "The old pictures of the town. But the page was already torn. I didn't do it!"

CHAPTER VI

THE CLUE ON THE WINDOW SILL

No one spoke for a moment and the silence got uncomfortable again. Ken knew they were looking at him; he felt foolish at having his carefully built-up theory swept out from under him.

Behind him, he heard Bowleg chuckle quietly. "Told you Tommy wouldn't do anything like that."

Sandy said defensively. "Well, if Tommy didn't, someone else did; the picture is torn out. In two different issues."

"What picture? I don't know what you're talking about." Wilson looked from Sandy to Ken.

Ken explained. "Don't you see?" he concluded. "If someone tore out the picture, it must show something important."

"Important to whom?" Wilson laughed shortly. "Not to me."

"But I thought ..." Ken let his voice drop off.

"Sure, you thought." Wilson didn't seem angry, but his voice had a dry, cutting quality. "Just because you found some torn old newspapers you thought there was a mystery to be unraveled. You don't know when the pages were torn. They might have been ripped one year ago—five years ago, even ten years ago. But right away you figure we Wilsons had something to do with it."

Ken thought for a moment of trying to tell Wilson why they believed the papers were destroyed very recently, but he realized how little weight his and Sandy's amateurish investigation of the torn edges would have with this unco-operative, bitter man.

He glanced at Sandy and read in his friend's face an echo of his own defeated feeling. "Well, I guess that about does it." He smiled at Wilson. "Thanks, anyway, for seeing us."

Bowleg began to move toward the door. "We'd better get moving. 'Night, Chet—Tommy."

"One thing more." Ken swung around toward Wilson again.

"Another clue?" Wilson smiled a little.

Ken shook his head. "Just plain information. This man Rex Burton who keeps appearing in the stories—is he still alive and around

here?"

"Burton?" Wilson shook his head. "No. I mean he's not around here any more. I don't know if he's still living or not. Why?"

"He seems to have been your father's best witness."

"Yes. I guess he was." Wilson began to tamp tobacco into his pipe. "Just goes to show you never know who your friends are—Dad fired him three—maybe four years before the trouble."

"Closer to four," Bowleg said. "Something to do with missing calves, wasn't it, Chet?"

"Yes. Wasn't a clear-cut case, so Dad didn't press it—just told Burton to leave. Burton took it hard—said he'd get even." Wilson looked up and again that faint smile crossed his face. "But when the trouble started, Burton wrote and said he'd be glad to testify for Dad—to state in court that both ranches always shared the water." Wilson clinched the pipe between his teeth and puffed on it. "He took off after the trial and none of us ever saw him again."

"You don't know where he went?" Ken asked.

"Seems to me he went down to the southern part of the state when he left here the first time." Wilson wrinkled his forehead in thought. "To a little town called Mud Flat, I think. Probably he went back after the trial."

"We'll try it," Ken said. "And thanks again."

Twenty minutes later they were back in their room, Sandy stretched out on the bed, Ken prowling restlessly around.

"We'd better get some sleep," Sandy said after Ken had completed his twentieth trip across the floor.

Ken sat on the edge of his bed. "Let's assume the Wilsons are telling the truth—we have no proof that they're not. And let's also assume that we're not completely nuts, and that those pages *were* torn out recently."

"O.K." Sandy sat up. "What are you driving at?"

"Then we come to the conclusion that someone else tore them out—either accidentally or on purpose." Ken lay back, his hands underneath his head. "But Chatham says nobody but Tommy looked at the old files recently."

"Chatham also said the door's always open—anybody could go in there and look."

"Anybody who had a legitimate purpose in looking through the back issues would naturally ask Chatham, wouldn't they? They wouldn't come in without asking permission—why should they?"

Sandy sighed. "Here we go again."

Ken grinned. "If I didn't know the family you came from, you'd almost convince me you didn't like snooping around."

"I like my sleep, too." Sandy got his feet out of his shoes and

wriggled his toes. "But go ahead, I'm listening."

Ken got serious again. "So let's make another assumption—that someone wanted to go through the files to remove certain items, and that that person didn't want anybody to know he'd done it."

"Sounds logical," Sandy admitted. "That means that someone sneaked into the building when no one was around—at night, maybe."

"And what we're going to do is try and find some evidence."

"Now?"

"Relax. Tomorrow will be soon enough."

Eight o'clock the next morning found them parked in front of the *News* office waiting for someone to open up the building.

"Told you we didn't have to get here at the crack of dawn," Sandy muttered.

"Good thing we did," Ken answered. "Now we know it's locked up at night."

"Could have found that out by asking Chatham—at nine o'clock."

"Here he comes," Ken said. "In that old sedan."

They stood on the porch while the newspaper owner unlocked the door. "Go right ahead," he said. "Make yourselves at home. You know where everything is."

"That's a good lock on the front door," Ken said, after they were in the file room. "It would be tough to get that open without a key."

"There's a side door, too," Sandy pointed out.

"Right. Wait a minute." Ken left the room. When he returned he said, "Well bolted."

"Oh."

"And," Ken continued, "there are three windows, but they couldn't have been used because they're all blocked by piles of paper."

"So it's either one of the two windows in this room or the one in Chatham's office."

Ken nodded and walked to the window in the corner. He inspected the lock carefully as Sandy looked over his shoulder. "It's locked, and it doesn't look as if it had been disturbed in years."

Sandy ran his finger across the accumulated dust and looked at the mark he made. "No doubt of that."

They took one brief glance at the other window and then looked at each other, smiling happily.

Sandy pointed. "It's been jimmied."

"And look at the marks in the dust on the sill. Somebody put his hand down to get over." He twisted sideways and placed his own hand over the clearly defined print, but not touching it. "Right hand—and big, too."

"Too big to be Tommy's," Sandy said. "But what about his father?"

Ken leaned back against the table. "Could be his, but it could also

be almost anybody's."

"Too bad we don't know anything about fingerprints."

Ken snapped his fingers. "What about Hank Banner?"

"Who?"

"You know—the newspaper man in Denver. Dad told us to get in touch with him if we needed any information or help."

Sandy looked puzzled. "But what do you expect him to do? Come rushing down here with the Denver Chief of Police to take everybody's fingerprints?"

"Of course not. We'll take the prints up there."

"Sure, sure." Sandy shook his head sadly. "Do you want me to rip out this window sill, or are you planning to carry the whole building to Denver?"

"Can't you photograph this print?"

"Who? Me? What do *I* know about photographing fingerprints?"

"They sprinkle them with powder to make the print stand out clearly, don't they?"

Sandy nodded. "I think they blow the powder across the surface and it sticks to the faint film of oil left by the fingers."

Ken began to move toward the door excitedly. "Well, come on. We can get some talcum powder in the drugstore."

"Hold everything. This is a white window sill, so dusting the prints with white powder won't do any good. We need some kind of black powder."

"Charcoal?"

Sandy shook his head. "I read somewhere about something you can use but—Got it! Lampblack—the stuff they use to make black paint, I think. And we'll need a soft brush—camel hair." Now Sandy was as excited as Ken. "Come on, we'll try the hardware store."

Ten minutes later when they left the store, Ken had two small envelopes: one filled with a fine black powder and the other with a fine white powder. Sandy was happily carrying a small camel's-hair brush of the type ordinarily used for fine varnishing work.

"Now for that window sill," Sandy said. "I'll use the close-up lens to get a big image on the film."

"Wait a minute." Ken stopped outside the newspaper office. "We're not sure we know how to do this. So let's not practice on the one print we need. We might spoil it."

"Guess you're right." Sandy brightened. "We could go back to the room and practice there. There must be plenty of prints around—or we could make some."

"Right." Ken laid the envelopes on the seat of the car and slid behind the wheel.

Back in their room they immediately began looking for fingerprints.

"I guess Ma cleans too well. I can't find a thing," Sandy said finally.

"We probably don't know how to look," Ken pointed out.

"We could dust powder over the whole room, I guess." Sandy grinned. "Bet Ma'd love that. I'm getting hungry," he added suddenly. "And it's only ten o'clock!"

Ken walked to the closet. "I think there's a couple of chocolate bars left." He returned with the brief case they had used to hold some magazines and what Sandy called emergency rations. Ken put it on the bed and bent over to unfasten the catch. "Hey! A print!" Sandy hurried to join him.

"See?" Ken slanted the surface a little more to catch the light on the polished brass lock.

"Wonder whose it is—yours or mine?" Sandy remarked.

"Who cares?" Ken spoke impatiently. "Come on— which do we use, the white powder or the black?"

"Black, I think." Sandy studied it. "Yes, black."

Ken laid the brief case on the floor and very carefully sprinkled a small quantity of the black powder over the catch. Then Sandy brushed it off with the silky brush, barely touching the surface with the fine hair.

"Perfect." Sandy reached for the camera. "Now I'll shoot it."

"What for? We know you can take pictures."

"One side, my boy." Sandy moved the case on the floor so that a patch of sunlight fell across the brass.

"This is a historic occasion. This is the first fingerprint ever photographed by the detecting firm of Holt and Allen."

"In that case," Ken bowed deeply, "I can hardly object. But hurry up."

Back in the newspaper office, they realized that the print on the window sill was not as brilliantly clear as the one on the polished brass, but Sandy felt sure it would make a good, sharp picture.

"If anybody looks through the window and sees what we're doing," he said, as he focused, "they'll think we've really gone off our rockers."

"Don't worry about that. They probably think so already."

"All the same, I wish they'd stop going by. Every time a shadow crosses, it changes my light reading." He pressed the shutter button. "Got it. Now what?"

"Now comes the hard part. We have to get a right-hand print from Mr. Wilson and Bowleg."

"Detectives always pass the suspect a silver cigarette case and get the prints that way." Sandy put the light meter into its case. "We could do it too—if we had one and if Wilson smoked cigarettes."

"Anyway, we can get Bowleg's easy enough. They must be all over

that ladder he was using.”

Chatham was so accustomed to seeing them around by this time that he didn't even look up as they left the office.

When they reached the intersection with the highway, Ken looked up and down for oncoming cars. But then, instead of turning to the right, he swung to the left and headed for the gas station.

Sandy looked at him in surprise. “We don't need any gas. We filled up the night we got here and we haven't driven twenty miles since.”

Ken pulled up alongside an old car that was standing before the pump. The hood was open and a man was bending over the engine.

“Wilson,” Ken said quietly.

The man straightened up and lifted the oil gauge to look at it. Then he caught sight of the boys. ” ‘Morning.”

” ‘Morning,” Ken said, and Sandy echoed him.

Wilson slid the gauge back into the motor. “If you need gas you'll have to wait until Alec gets finished phoning—or get it yourself.”

He walked back into the station and came out in a moment carrying a sealed can of oil. He pushed the can opener into the top and let the oil pour into the crankcase. When the can was empty, he put it down on the cement curbing and closed the hood. Then, without further word to the boys, he drove off.

Ken was out of the car in a single second, and, in another, he was back inside setting the empty oil can on the floor at Sandy's feet. Where Wilson had grasped the can, there were five clear fingerprints, so sharp against the white paint of the can that powdering would be unnecessary. Ken drove off immediately.

By the time Ma rang the dinner bell at noon Sandy had photographed the can and Ken had dropped it into a trash barrel,

After dinner, while Bowleg drove into town to pick up some supplies, Ken and Sandy found the ladder he had been using the day before and managed to find a good right-hand set of prints which Sandy shot easily.

“We got all of them,” Ken said when they were back in the room. “Now we have to develop them.”

“Tonight, when it gets dark enough to load the developing tank.”

“In that case we might get ir. a couple of hours fishing. How about it?”

“Suits me.” Sandy got out of the chair and they walked outside.

“We'll have to dig some worms.”

There was chicken for supper that night—and no fish, a fact that Ma and Bowleg let neither the boys nor Smith forget.

“I give up,” Smith said when the meal was over. “I can't take any more of this. I'm going to the movies.” He looked around. “Anybody care to join me?”

Ma and Bowleg declined on the grounds of being too tired, and the boys, anxious to get at the films, said they had some work they wanted to do.

By half past eight Sandy figured it was dark enough to load the developing tank. He disappeared with it into the closet.

Five minutes later he was out again, the film safely in the lightproof tank. "Now for the developer." He picked up the quart bottle of solution, tilted it over the opening in the tank, and suddenly righted it again. He sniffed at the open bottle. "Here, smell this." His voice was grimly serious.

Ken got up and sniffed. "It smells like hypo! You sure you got the right bottle?"

Sandy pointed to the label. "It's the developer bottle, all right—and anyway, it doesn't smell strong enough to be *pure* hypo. It smells like a mixture of the two."

Ken scurried across the room, picked up a bottle marked HYPO, unscrewed the top and sniffed. "Smell this—it's weak."

He held the bottle outstretched while Sandy inhaled.

"You're right—and it adds up."

"You mean some hypo was poured into the developer, and the hypo bottle was then refilled with water. Huh?"

Sandy nodded slowly. "And you know what would have happened if we'd put the film in this developer?"

"Sure. It would come out blank—clear as if it had never been exposed." Ken set the bottle down again. "Look, Sandy, you're sure *he* couldn't have made this mistake?"

"Absolutely. I could have labeled the bottles wrong, but that isn't what's happened." He sat down slowly, still holding the bottle of defective solution in his hand. "Someone must have seen us taking the picture at the newspaper office—*someone who doesn't want us to have his prints!*"

CHAPTER VII

THE EVIDENCE DISAPPEARS

Ken and Sandy stared at each other, the same thought having occurred to both of them.

It was Ken who spoke first. "Whoever sabotaged the developer must be someone who has access to our room. And that includes everybody in this house."

"And since nobody ever locks doors around here, it also includes anybody else who wants to get in on the act," Sandy added. "Like the Wilsons, for instance, or Raymond."

"I think we can rule out Ma and Smith," Ken said thoughtfully. "They have the opportunity, but so far as we know, they have no motive."

"That rules Raymond out too," Sandy remarked. "He doesn't seem to have any motive—he offered to help us."

"Which," Ken concluded, "brings us right back to the Wilsons."

Sandy stood up and picked the bottle off the floor. "If *they* have a motive for blocking this story—I don't see it." He walked toward the bathroom. "I'm going to dump this developer down the drain and mix some fresh stock."

They mixed fresh solutions from the small supply of chemicals Sandy had brought, and then poured the fresh developer into the loaded film tank. When the films had been developed, fixed, and washed, Sandy removed the roll from the reel and held it up to the light.

"Perfect," he said. "Look at those negatives. But what a waste—seven exposures out of the thirty-six."

Ken shook his head. "Not a waste at ah1. We're going to use this film."

Sandy looked blank. "How?"

"Somebody wanted us to spoil this roll," Ken said. "And we're going to let him think we did." He rummaged in his bag for a pair of scissors. "I'm going to cut off the good negatives. We'll hang them up to dry 'way back in our closet. The blank part we'll hang up in the

room in full sight of anybody who wants to look. And to make sure, we're going to tell everybody around here that we *did* spoil the roll."

After they had replaced the equipment, they went into the living room to tell their tale of woe. Ma was sewing, and Bowleg, looking a little peculiar with glasses far down on his nose, was reading a magazine.

"Finished?" Ma looked up from her work.

Ken nodded. "Didn't do so good, either."

Bowleg put a finger on the page to mark his place. "Why?"

Sandy took it up. "Got out my stuff to develop a roll of film, but I guess the developer went bad—must have bounced it around too much on the trip."

"Pshaw!" Ma was sympathetic.

"Anything important?" Bowleg asked.

Ken sat down in one of the big leather chairs. "Not very. Some scenery and some pictures we took down at the newspaper office."

Bowleg grunted and returned to his magazine.

"Want a glass of milk?" Ma asked.

"Too full," Ken said.

Sandy seemed more interested. "With cookies?"

Ma stuck the needle through the cloth and stood up. "I guess we can find a couple of cookies—if Bowleg left any."

"Ain't had a one," he said, without looking up. But after Ma and Sandy had disappeared into the kitchen, he winked broadly at Ken.

The refrigerator door slammed in the kitchen, and Sandy reappeared carrying a tall glass of milk in one hand and a saucer heaped with cookies in the other. Ma followed.

"I guess I'm the only cook in the world who can make cookies that evaporate," she said. "They just sort of disappear into thin air."

"They get so light they just float away," Bowleg drawled.

"I'll put some lead in them next time," Ma promised. She picked up her sewing basket. "Or maybe I'll put some lead in somebody else."

"Them's fightin' words, Ma," Bowleg said.

Ma sighed. "I don't know why I keep this up," she said to the boys. "I never win, anyway." She looked at the clock on the mantle. "It's late for an old woman like me. I'm going to bed."

The brilliant glare of headlights swept through the large windows almost as she spoke. Ma looked out of the window. "Mr. Smith coming back so soon?"

Bowleg twisted sideways to look too, closed the magazine, and stood up quickly. "It's the Raymond station wagon."

Without any further word, he walked across the room and vanished. They heard the back door slam a moment later.

Ma shook her head. "He wants to see you, I suppose. I think I'll run

along too. Good night.”

Ken opened the door and stood aside to allow Raymond and Madden to enter.

”Evening,” the rancher said pleasantly. Madden nodded silently.

”Sit down,” Ken invited.

”Thanks.” Raymond settled himself into a chair while Madden crossed over to lean against the mantel in his favorite pose.

”Folks gone to bed?” Raymond asked.

”Yes,” Ken said. “All except Mr. Smith—he’s at the movies.”

”Ma got another guest?” Raymond looked at Ken as he fished in the pocket of his fancy sports jacket for his cigarette case.

Sandy smiled. “He’s here for the fishing—not that he catches any more than we do.”

Raymond had taken a cigarette out of the container and was tapping it against the polished silver surface. “No luck, eh?”

Ken shook his head sadly. “Not yet, anyway.”

”Give it some time,” Raymond advised. “Wait until they get a little hungrier than they are now. They’ll bite.” He began to slide the case back into his pocket, but stopped. “Sorry, Clint. Have one?”

”Thanks.” Madden walked across and took the case. He set it on the table after he had taken a cigarette and casually struck a wooden match on the rough denim of his jeans.

”How are you coming with the story?” Raymond blew a lungful of smoke into the room.”

”Too early to tell,” Ken answered.

”See Wilson yet?” Madden stopped playing with the burnt match and tossed it into the fireplace.

”Yes,” Sandy said. “But he wants no part of it.”

Raymond nodded. “That’s what I figured.” He ground the cigarette butt into an ash tray. “Fact of the matter,” he went on, “is that I had a purpose in coming here tonight. Figured that maybe you could do something I haven’t been able to—act as an intermediary, sort of.”

The boys looked at him inquiringly.

”You know I made an offer for the Wilson place.”

Ken nodded.

”I don’t need the land.” Raymond added. “But it would be worth something to me to buy him out and clear this matter up once and for all.”

”I don’t see what we can do,” Ken said.

”I’m sure that Wilson would see the logic of the move if someone other than myself pointed it out to him. I wondered if you could do that.”

”Mr. Raymond’d make a fair offer—much more than the land is worth,” Madden said.

"We had only one short talk with Wilson," Ken said, "and it wasn't friendly enough for me to think we could suggest anything he'd agree with."

"You might get to know him better," Raymond pointed out. "And in any case you'd have a better chance than we have." He got up out of the chair. "Remember I'm willing to talk business." He looked at Madden. "Ready, Clint?"

Madden moved away from the mantel with that smooth grace that characterized him. "Ready."

They had just reached the door when another pair of headlights showed at the end of the driveway.

"Must be Smith," Sandy said.

The oncoming car pulled to a stop directly behind the station wagon which was parked at the end of the porch, and a moment later Smith joined them. "Couldn't get by," he said.

"Mr. Smith," Ken said, "this is Mr. Raymond and Mr. Madden."

The men shook hands.

"You're the fisherman I heard about?" Raymond asked.

"Would-be fisherman," Smith corrected, smiling. "But I'll get one yet." He turned to the boys. "You should have come with me—the picture was pretty good."

"We might just as well have gone along," Sandy answered, "for all we accomplished here."

"Why? What happened?"

"Nothing much," Ken said, "except that we've got a nice blank strip of film. The developer was spoiled."

"Too bad." Smith sounded sorry. "Can you take the pictures over again?"

"Sure," Ken said.

"Well, in that case ..."

"We'd better get along." Raymond turned to Smith. "Glad to have met you, Mr. Smith. I hope your luck turns."

"I hope so, too." Smith laughed. "Believe it or not, I've got a reputation as a fisherman back home and I want to keep it. I'll go along and put my car away."

Ken closed the front door. "I think everybody knows about the films now."

Sandy picked up the glass of milk and drained it. "We'd better turn in."

Sandy sighed as he sat down to unlace his shoes. "I'm beginning to feel as if I were living in a movie. I keep expecting somebody to pop out from under the bed or something." He scratched his head. "If I wasn't so sure the chemicals were monkeyed with, I'd say we were dreaming this whole thing up."

"More like a nightmare." Ken yawned. "Well, well take the prints to Denver tomorrow and have them ..." He stopped suddenly. "If we're going to Denver, I'd better call Banner and make an appointment."

"Now?" Sandy looked at his watch. "It's almost eleven o'clock."

"He works on the *Chronicle*—it's a morning paper, and that means he'll be at work now. The telephone's in the living room, isn't it?"

"Yes. And there's an extension in the kitchen."

"Living room's closer."

A moment after Ken left, Sandy trotted after him.

"Hey," he said. "Don't you want his number?"

Ken put down the telephone book. "I forgot Dad gave it to us. Good thing, too. This book doesn't list anything but half a dozen small towns around here."

He gave the operator the number and both boys waited while the connection was put through, and then waited a little longer while the *Chronicle* operator rang Banner. It took only a moment to make an appointment for eleven the next morning. Just as Ken was taking the receiver from his ear a strange expression crossed his face. He listened intently. "Go see if there's anyone in the kitchen," he whispered. "Hurry!"

Sandy moved swiftly and silently on his stockinged feet. He was back in a few seconds. "No one there. Why?"

Ken replaced the receiver on its hook. "I think somebody was listening in on my conversation."

"Not on the extension, anyway." Sandy leaned over Ken to look at the number of their phone. "Could be," he said quietly. "This is a party line."

Ken read the number aloud. "Seven-two, ring three."

Sandy picked up the phone book and riffled through it until he came to the section devoted to Mesa Alta. "Only two pages of listings. Let's check."

They took the book back to their room and read every listing, and when they had finished they knew that there were four people on Ma's line. Two of the names meant nothing to them; the third was the number for the inn, and the fourth was Raymond's. There was no number listed for Wilson.

"Very interesting," Ken commented.

"Except," Sandy offered, "that Raymond and Madden hadn't been gone more than ten minutes before you made that call."

"That's plenty of time," Ken objected. "He could get home in five, if he had to."

"But how did he know he had to? You didn't tell him you were going to make a call."

"That's right."

"Maybe we're carrying this a little too far." Sandy got up to replace the telephone book. "Maybe you just imagined it?"

"Maybe. But we didn't imagine the bad developer."

Sandy stopped at the door. "No—that was no imagination." He grinned suddenly. "Of course, I hate to admit it, but it is possible that I ruined it while I was mixing it back home."

"Even you wouldn't mix hypo with developer," Ken said.

Sandy spoke a little more seriously. "I only said it was *possible*." He went on out.

Ken thought this over while he unbuttoned his shirt. "You know—" he started to say when Sandy came back, but he didn't continue.

Sandy had laid his handkerchief on the bed and was carefully unfolding it. "Raymond forgot his cigarette case. Now we've got his prints and Madden's too."

"We don't know which is which," Ken remarked, leaning over to get a better look.

"We can find that out later if either of the prints is identical with the set we found on the window sill."

"O.K. Let's shoot them now. We'll want to take them with us tomorrow morning."

When they finished, Sandy wiped the black powder off the silver case before returning it to the living room. "We'll call him tomorrow, to tell him it's safe," he said. He yawned again and stretched. "And now I'm hitting the hay, and if all this turns out to be wasted time, you'll hear about it."

Ten minutes after the lights had been turned off Ken spoke quietly. "Sandy? You awake?"

"Huh?"

"You awake?"

Sandy sat up disgustedly. "Think I'm talking in my sleep? Yes, I'm awake—and I'll probably stay that way with you around."

"I think I know how to convince ourselves that we're not imagining all this."

"How?"

"Did we clean the black powder off the window sill when we finished shooting that print?"

"No. But why worry about it?"

"I'm not worried about it." Ken was sitting up now too. "But someone else is—the person who tried to spoil the film. He won't give us another chance to take the picture—will he?"

"Hardly." Sandy propped himself up on one elbow. "We'll check tomorrow morning to see if the print's been wiped off."

"We can check now, can't we?"

"You're crazy! It's one o'clock. We'll wake everybody up taking the

car out.”

“We won’t take the car. We’ll walk.”

Sandy swung his legs over the side of the bed. “O.K.”

They dressed in the dark, and slipped silently out of the back door.

There wasn’t a sign of anyone as they crossed the highway, and the two dim street lights on Main Street were the only things that seemed awake in the town. A moment later they were standing outside the newspaper office window.

Ken took a quick look around before he pressed the button on the flashlight. The window was dirty, but not dirty enough to completely obstruct their view.

“Feel better now, Sandy?”

“Better—and worse,” Sandy muttered.

The dusty window sill had been wiped clean—its white, unmarked surface gleamed at them.

CHAPTER VIII

WHOSE FINGERPRINT?

“You’re sure you don’t want me to pack a lunch?” Ma stood in the doorway watching Ken and Sandy walk across the court to the car.

Ken turned to speak over his shoulder. “Not today, Ma. We’ll stop and get something to eat.” He waved. “See you about five.”

Sandy backed the car out of the shed and then moved forward toward the driveway. “We got everything?”

Ken nodded and then waved to Ma once more as they rounded the corner of the house. He patted his jacket pocket. “All we need are those negatives—and I’ve got them right here.”

“On to Denver—ninety miles away.” Sandy inhaled deeply. “What a day!”

“Feels good, huh?” Ken smiled. “I mean knowing once and for all that we’re not making up mysteries.”

Sandy turned left on the highway and let the car out a bit until the wind was singing past it. “And knowing,” he added, “that in a couple of hours we’ll learn who it is that’s been camping on our trail and getting in our hair.”

They were going to Denver along the western route—the road through Leadville, the famous old silver mining town. They dipped down the long grades and roared up out of the valleys as the terrain changed from cattle to mining country. They passed hillsides pockmarked with old shafts, and went by the sprawling buildings of the smelters, some long dead and forsaken, others working at full blast.

They passed Leadville, its abandoned shacks clinging to the scarred hillsides where once thousands of tons of silver ore were loaded into wagons. The town was quiet—little more than a main street—but the signs of its flourishing past were still visible: the old hotels and gambling halls, and a theater that had been the wonder of its day.

The clock on the dashboard was moving up toward half past ten when they began to encounter the traffic of Denver’s suburbs.

“We’d better ask for directions,” Ken suggested. “We could wander

around here for hours without finding the *Chronicle* office, I bet.”

Sandy pulled over to the curb and Ken leaned out to ask a passer-by which way to go.

Fifteen minutes later they stepped out of the car and let a parking-lot attendant drive it off. They were almost directly across the street from the building that housed Banner’s newspaper.

He was waiting for them in his office—a large barn-like room deserted at this time of the day, but still bearing marks of the work of the night before. The floor was littered with crumpled copy paper and cigarette butts. Banner pushed several copies of the newspaper off his desk and pulled up a couple of chairs.

“Now,” he said, “what can I do for you?”

“You know what Dad’s working on?” Ken asked.

Banner nodded. “Global’s doing a feature series on famous old land feuds of the West.”

“And Dad’s doing the one on the Wilson-Raymond case.”

“It happened about twenty years ago,” Sandy explained.

“A little before my time.” Banner grinned. “I’ve heard about it, of course.” He looked a little puzzled. “But what are you doing on it?”

“Nothing much,” Ken admitted. “It’s really a sort of vacation for us, and for Dad, too. He wanted some time off after that freighter story he did, and Global said he could come out here and loaf while he wrote this one.”

Banner laughed. “Good old Global—always willing to give someone a vacation—as long as they work at the same time.” He opened his desk drawer and dug around among the scattered papers inside until he found a package of chewing gum. When the boys refused, he popped a piece in his mouth and began to chew vigorously. “What have you been doing at Mesa Alta? Snooping?”

“In a way,” Sandy said. “What we were *trying* to do was locate some source material for Ken’s father. You know, run down old papers, old pictures, take some new ones maybe, and even interview Raymond and Wilson.”

Banner caught the emphasis on the word “trying.” “Somebody getting in your way?”

“It looks like it.” Ken leaned forward and gave Banner a concise story of the strange happenings. “So you see,” he concluded, “we thought if we could find out who’s behind all this monkey business, we’d know what to do.”

“And if there is something fishy about the old lawsuit, you wouldn’t mind digging that up either, would you?” Banner remarked.

Both boys smiled. “Well,” Sandy said, “it would make a better story.”

“It sure would,” Banner agreed. “But it does sound like you’re

barking up the wrong tree.” Ken and Sandy glanced at each other. “I’m not saying these things didn’t happen to you,” he went on hurriedly. “I’m merely saying that the underlying reason is probably Wilson’s pride, as you pointed out, and not some deep dark secret of the past.” He leaned over and yanked the phone within reach. “Anyway, I’ll see if I can have those fingerprints checked for you.”

He jiggled the bar up and down impatiently. “Police headquarters, Gladys ... Huh? No, I’m not trying to get a parking ticket fixed.” There was a pause and then Banner said, “Captain Steiner, please. Banner, *Chronicle*, calling.”

He waited some more. “Hello, Steiner? This is Banner. Got a free half hour? No, not me—some friends of mine want advice on some fingerprints. No.” Banner shot a glance in the boys’ direction. “I guess you would call them amateurs—but not amateur detectives. Sure. Right away.” He dropped the telephone back in its cradle and turned to the boys, grinning. “He hates amateur detectives. Those negatives better be good.” He stood up. “Let’s go. It’s right around the corner.”

Banner led them past the desk sergeant and up a flight of stairs that were scrubbed almost to whiteness and smelled a little of antiseptic. They walked down a long corridor and stopped before a frosted-glass door on which was printed in black paint: LABORATORY. Banner pushed the door open and let the boys precede him inside.

“Captain Steiner, meet Ken Holt and Sandy Allen.”

Steiner got up from the tall stool on which he had been sitting and snapped off the brilliant light aimed at the mirror of the microscope he had been looking through. His hand was about the size of a small ham—at least it looked that big when it enfolded Ken’s. Even Sandy’s seemed small by comparison.

“This is out of your jurisdiction,” Banner said. “We just want some advice.” He turned to Ken. “Show him the negatives.”

Ken took the envelope from his pocket and pulled out of it four smaller cellophane envelopes. All were labeled in ink.

“We’d like to know,” Ken said in explanation, “which of these prints matches this one.” He held up the envelope marked WINDOW SILL.

Captain Steiner took it and held it up against the light. “You boys take this picture?”

“Yes.” Sandy moved forward. “Something wrong?”

Steiner shook his head without taking his eyes off the negative. “No. It’s a good shot—better than a lot I get from the department.”

He picked up another marked WILSON and held it up beside the first, then held them both in one hand to look through them with a magnifying glass. “It isn’t this one, anyway. That’s plain.”

The boys waited quietly as Steiner picked up the negative of the several fingerprints from the cigarette case.

"Two different prints on this one," Steiner grunted as he used the magnifying glass once more. "Hmm." He looked even more carefully as the boys moved closer. "One of them ..."

"Does it match?" Ken asked, his voice a little tense.

"Close enough to warrant a better inspection." Steiner crossed the room with Banner and the two boys close behind him. On a table near the far wall stood a projector into which he slid both negatives: the one of the cigarette case, and the one of the window sill.

Reaching behind the projector to a switch on the wall, the policeman turned off the room lights and then flicked the switch of the projector. A rectangle of light appeared on the far wall where a screen was fastened. Steiner manipulated the controls, and the negatives were moved around until a thumbprint from the window sill was directly beside a thumbprint from the cigarette case. Then he focused the machine until the images were clear and distinct and almost two feet tall.

"Look the same to me," Sandy said quietly.

For almost a minute Steiner studied the two prints. He walked forward and looked at them closely, keeping to one side to stay out of the beam of light. When he turned, he was shaking his head. "No. They're not the same."

Ken let out his breath with a sigh.

Steiner shut off the projection light and removed the cigarette case negative, leaving the window-sill shot in the projector. He walked back to the other table and picked up the last envelope, labeled BOWLEG.

"There are two negatives here," Steiner said.

Ken looked. "Oh—this other one—the one on the brass lock—that was just a test. It doesn't count." He removed it.

Steiner slipped Bowleg's prints into the machine and readjusted the apparatus to his liking. Again he looked at the projected images carefully while both boys stopped breathing. This *had* to be the one. They couldn't be wrong.

But a moment later Steiner turned off the light. "Nope."

There was a small smile on Banner's face as he looked at the boys. "What does that do to your theory?"

Ken swallowed. "I guess we didn't get the right prints," he said. "But I'm sure we're not ..."

"Whose is this?" Steiner was holding up the test negative—the one Sandy had taken to mark a historic occasion.

"Probably mine or Sandy's," Ken said a little absently. He wanted some time to think—to figure out who else might have thought it important to steal into the *News* office and tear out the pictures.

Sandy spoke up slowly. "I guess we could be wrong, Ken. I mean—"

maybe that print on the window sill hasn't anything to do with us at all. Maybe ..."

"It *has* to have something to do with us. Coincidence goes only so far. We should have taken Tommy's prints, and maybe some of the men who work for Raymond. Maybe even Ma's."

"But we can't go around taking everybody's fingerprints." Sandy sounded helpless and defeated.

There was a click and the lights in the room went off. Once more the projector threw enlarged images against the wall, and once more the huge policeman studied them carefully.

"Did you say that one of you two made this print—the one on the bright brass?" He sounded a little cross—a little impatient.

"Yes," Ken said. "It's from our brief case, so it must be either mine or Sandy's."

Steiner clicked the room lights on again. "Then why did you waste my time on this nonsense? I'm a busy man."

"Waste your time?" Ken repeated.

"Exactly. That print on the brass surface is the same as the print on the window sill. If one of them's yours—or his—then they both are. And I think you should remember having put your hand on that sill, without going through all this rigmarole."

"But ... but ... we didn't put our hands on the window sill," Sandy protested. "We never got near it—either of us—until we took the picture, and then we were careful not to touch the wood any place."

"Wait a minute." Ken spoke up eagerly. "If the person who searched our bureau drawers didn't know our bags were empty—maybe that print on the brass *isn't* ours."

"We'll find that out quick enough." Steiner still sounded peeved. "Come here." He marched the boys to the laboratory bench that ran down the middle of the room and let them ink their right thumbs. Then he pressed the thumbs on a piece of white paper, and took the impressions back to the projector where he compared them with the prints on the window sill and on the brief-case lock.

When he spoke again, his voice had lost all its irritation. "You're right, son. That's not your print—and not your friend's, either. Seems like somebody else was fooling around with your brief case—the same man who left the prints on the window sill."

There was an instant of stunned silence and then Ken spoke. "And it isn't Wilson, or Bowleg, or Raymond, or Madden!"

CHAPTER IX

BALKED

There wasn't much reason for staying in the laboratory after that; they had found out what they wanted to know—at least part of it. But the owner of the mysterious fingerprint still had to be determined, and it took a great deal of persuasiveness to keep Banner from going back to Mesa Alta with them to help.

"I suppose you're right," Banner agreed reluctantly. "But I wish there was something I could do. It's not every day I get a chance to work on a story with a man like your father."

Ken suddenly remembered. "There is something we need help on."

Banner leaned forward eagerly. "What?"

"We've been trying to track down an old foreman of Wilson's—Rex Burton. He testified for Wilson and then disappeared. Wilson thinks he was living in a town called Mud Flat."

"That's down in the southern part of the state," Banner pulled a Colorado highway map from his desk drawer. "Here it is. About one hundred and fifty miles from Mesa Alta. We've got a correspondent near it, in New City. I'll give him a call and see if he can dig something up for you." Banner scribbled on a piece of paper. "Burton, huh?"

"We'll keep in touch with you," Ken said, "and thanks for the help."

It was half past three when they topped the last rise and saw Mesa Alta below them.

"Stop at the post office," Sandy suggested. "Maybe there's a letter from home."

They almost bumped into Tommy Wilson when they went through the door of the small building. The boys hesitated a moment, waiting for him to speak first.

"Hello," Tommy said finally, and walked out of the building, barely giving Ken time to answer him.

When they were outside again, Tommy was waiting at the foot of the stairs.

"How about some ice cream?" Ken said loudly to Sandy. And then,

turning toward Tommy, added, "Care for some?"

The answer was a little slow in coming, and when Tommy did speak it was quickly—as if he wanted to talk before he could change his mind again. "All right."

"Swell. Let's go."

They perched themselves on stools at the soda fountain in the drugstore and Sandy ordered for all of them.

"Go fishing today?" Ken tried to get the conversation going.

Tommy shook his head. "Not today." He paused again and then blurted out, "Did you find out anything in Denver?"

Ken almost choked on a mouthful of ice cream. "How'd you know we went to Denver?"

"Oh." Tommy looked embarrassed. "I—I heard Mr. Raymond and Clint Madden talking about it."

"I wonder how they found out," Sandy muttered, "Only Ma knew where we went."

"Party line," Ken said. "Remember? How did you manage to hear them talk about it, Tommy?"

Tommy looked down at his plate. "I was getting some air in my bicycle tire over at Alec's gas station. They drove up for gas and—" He looked up. "I don't like them, so I pushed my bike around the corner of the building. I was waiting for them to drive off, and that's when I heard Mr. Raymond say he wondered what you were looking for in Denver." He faced Ken squarely, "Did you find anything important?"

Ken looked across the youngster at Sandy, motioned almost imperceptibly toward Tommy, and raised his eyebrows. Sandy answered by nodding.

"We didn't find anything, Tommy, but we're pretty sure someone is trying to keep us from learning too much."

"It's not us." Tommy spoke quickly. "I don't suppose you believe me—on account of the torn newspapers."

"I'm pretty sure you didn't tear those pages." Ken looked straight into Tommy's suddenly raised eyes. "That's what we were doing in Denver today—checking up." Ken waited until the clerk moved to the other end of the soda fountain. "I don't care what your father says—there's something fishy around here."

"What?" Tommy's restless hands were still.

Ken shook his head. "We don't know what—that's the trouble. Look, Tommy. Does your father have any papers dealing with the case—things that might give us a clue?"

"He's got a whole envelope of stuff, but I couldn't let you see anything unless my father said so."

"Tell him about the fingerprints," Sandy said. "Maybe that'll convince Mr. Wilson to help us."

"Fingerprints? Whose fingerprints?"

Ken told him.

"But who ... ?" Tommy's voice rose a little.

"Keep it down," Sandy said. "We don't want the town to know what we've found."

"This is what we want you to do, Tommy." Ken's voice had an urgency in it. "Tell your father what we told you, and tell him we want to talk to him again."

"But don't tell anybody else," Sandy added.

"All right." Tommy slipped off the stool.

"Wait a minute." Ken checked him. "Don't call us up—we can't trust the phone. Come around through our back door—or let Bowleg come."

"About half past eight tonight," Tommy said. He moved off a few feet and then stopped to turn around. He was smiling—it was the first time the boys had ever seen him smile. "And thanks."

"Now," Sandy said, after the screen door had slammed behind the youngster, "let's get back to Raymond and Madden. How did they know we went to Denver?"

"The party line. Someone was listening in."

Sandy scraped the last of the ice cream from his plate before he answered. "We never liked coincidences, and you can't tell me that Raymond's picking up his phone just in time to hear you call Banner isn't one of the world's best-timed accidents."

"I know," Ken admitted. "But what else could it have been? He certainly doesn't keep someone at the phone all the time just in case we might make a call." He dropped his spoon into the plate. "And anyway, the fingerprints seem to prove that neither he nor Madden are involved in that business of our luggage or the newspaper office."

They got off the stools and made their way toward the door. "And you can't deny the important fact that Raymond is the most co-operative person in this case. He can't be hiding anything."

"O.K." Sandy admitted defeat. "So it's just by accident that somebody in Raymond's house tried to make a call then and heard you on the line."

They walked to the car in silence, the unanswered questions spinning around in their heads. It wasn't until he shut off the motor in Ma's shed that either of them spoke.

"Do you suppose Ma told anyone we were going to Denver?"

Ken put the car keys in his pocket and slid out of the front seat. "We didn't tell her to keep it a secret, so she might have said something to somebody. But I don't think she would deliberately tell Raymond or Madden. She doesn't seem to like them any too well."

"We can ask her," Sandy suggested.

"If we can find a way of doing it without arousing her own suspicions of the importance of the trip."

They were halfway to the house when Smith's car came around the turn in the drive. He stopped with an abruptness that locked the wheels and ploughed furrows in the packed earth.

"Look!" He picked a creel off the seat and extended it over the side of the car to show them the six trout it contained. "See what lures will do?"

"Say, you've got something there, haven't you?" Sandy moved up to admire the shimmering beauties in the wicker basket. "Maybe we ought to give up the worm routine, huh?"

"Where'd you get them?" Ken asked. "Above the town or below?"

Smith winked. "That'd be giving away top secret information. But since you use worms and therefore will not catch any fish, I'll tell you. There's a nice pool about a mile south. Try it sometime." He handed the basket to Ken. "Will you give these to Ma to put on ice? Well eat them tonight." He drove off to put his car in the shed.

"I'll go to the room and get cleaned up," Sandy said. "Don't forget to ask Ma if you get a chance."

Ma hadn't told anybody except Bowleg about their trip to Denver, and since it was practically impossible to believe that Bowleg would ever tell Raymond anything, the boys were no further ahead.

When they went in for supper an hour later, the question was still unanswered—unless they chose to believe that it was by pure accident that someone had overheard Ken's conversation with Banner.

Halfway through the meal, the telephone bell rang three times.

"I'll get it, Ma." Bowleg pushed his chair back and stood up, just as Smith broke into a furious fit of coughing. His face reddened and he seemed unable to catch his breath. Ken handed him a glass of water, but Smith shook his head and lurched to his feet.

"It's my asthma," he gasped. "Have pills in my room."

"Where are they? I'll get them." Ken jumped up too.

Bowleg came back then. "Operator made a mistake. What's the trouble?"

Smith shook his head and continued to cough heavily. He walked toward the door, but when he got there, he leaned against the jamb, taking in huge gulps of air; the coughs seemed to subside. A moment later he took his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his eyes.

"Sorry," he said, coming back to the table. "It gets me every once in a while. I've got some pills in my room that I crush and inhale. That stops it." He sat down. "Guess I won't need them now." There was nothing to interfere with the rest of the meal and by eight o'clock the dishes were washed, and dried, and Ma and Smith had settled themselves in the living room, Ma with her sewing and Smith with a

magazine. Ken and Sandy went back to their room to stretch out on their beds and ponder over the problems that still faced them.

At nine o'clock the light tap on the window startled them. Ken reached over and snapped on the lamp that stood between the two beds and they saw Bowleg peering in at them. Ken opened the door.

"Better turn off the light," Bowleg advised, and waited by the door until Sandy had done so. "If you two are right, we better play it safe."

"Hear from Wilson?" Ken asked eagerly.

"Yep. I'll take you there."

They went out the back door and got into Bowleg's car which he allowed to coast down the grade almost to the street before starting the motor.

"Seems kinda silly to me," he said. "Sneaking around like this."

In the Wilsons' yard the huge dog greeted them sullenly, but he seemed to remember them, and Bowleg didn't take the precaution of holding his collar as they walked toward the house.

"Tommy's been telling me what you told him," Wilson said as soon as they were seated around the table.

"How about catching me up?" Bowleg asked. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Ken related the events swiftly, adding the fact that Raymond and Madden knew they had gone to Denver.

"Did you tell anyone we were going?" he asked Bowleg.

"Nope. Not even Chet."

"And Ma didn't," Sandy added.

"Supposing all your assumptions are right," Wilson interrupted.

"Let's agree that somebody is trying to make it difficult for you to get the story. I know it's not us." His glance took in his son and Bowleg. "And it appears that you feel the same way. That leaves only Raymond as an interested party."

"But neither his nor Madden's fingerprints were on that window sill."

"Maybe it's one of his men." Bowleg began to roll a cigarette.

"Wouldn't put it past some of them."

"That's not the point," Wilson said. "What do you think I can do?" He smiled slightly. "Assuming I decide to help."

"I want you to go over the case with us," Ken said. "Maybe there's some little detail that will give us a clue —something you've completely forgotten and which you may not think important."

"Don't you think we figured out every angle at the time?"

"Maybe you did, but maybe you overlooked something." Ken moved close to the table and put his elbows on it. "Your father fought the case on the assumption that he could prove the two ranches shared the water rights, no matter where the boundary line was."

"Yes. That was our only chance."

"Nothing could have been done to shift the line?" Sandy asked.

"You've seen the markers," Wilson replied. "Can you figure out any way of moving either of the rocks?"

"Could they have used the wrong rock?" Sandy persisted.

Bowleg snorted. "There are only two that fit the description."

Sandy shook his head helplessly. "It just seems impossible that your father and Wright made such a mistake in laying out the boundary."

"Not so impossible," Wilson answered, "when you remember that the range was open in those days. The actual property line didn't mean so much."

"Tell me what happened when Raymond first told your father about the water rights."

"It's a long story," Wilson said. "And not a very pretty one from my point of view."

Ken sensed the man's stubborn streak coming to the fore again and decided not to press for further information along those lines at the moment. "Could we take a look at whatever papers you have?"

Wilson thought a long moment before he made up his mind. "I don't suppose it would do any harm—or any good, for that matter."

He walked to an old bureau and took from the top drawer a Manila envelope. "Here it is—the lot of it."

The two boys began to leaf through the papers. Most of them were clippings from the newspapers, but there were no pictures of any kind. The subpoena was there summoning old Mr. Wilson to court, and there were various other legal documents that made little sense to either Ken or Sandy. Almost two hours later they looked up to admit that they had found nothing that seemed to offer any help.

"Only this," Ken said, holding up a creased envelope. "The letter from Burton offering to come up and testify for you."

"Looks as if he never went to school," Sandy muttered as he scanned the almost illegible, sprawling letters. "What's the postmark?"

Ken turned the envelope over. "Mud Flat, September 18." He dropped the envelope back on the table. "We've got someone trying to run Burton down for us."

"Don't see what he could add to what I've told you." Wilson got to his feet as if to indicate that he had wasted enough time.

"Can you tell me anything about Burton?" Ken asked.

Wilson shrugged. "Not much. He first came through here when he worked on the railroad. He was a blaster."

Bowleg nodded. "Yep. He helped blast the tunnels through for the narrow gauge."

"He just stayed on—liked it here, I guess. Was a pretty good worker, my father always said. Then came that trouble about the calves and he

left. The next time he turned up was during the trial and then he left town again."

Ken sighed and stood up. "Nothing seems to help," he admitted, "and nothing seems to add up, either."

"If I were you," Wilson advised, "I'd either forget about the fingerprints, or figure out some other explanation for them—some perfectly innocent explanation. There must be one."

"I'm not ready to give up yet," Ken said. "I'll keep you advised. Thanks for giving us the time."

"I've got plenty of that," Wilson said a little bitterly.

Bowleg was unusually silent on the way home, and it wasn't until he stopped the car near the barn that he spoke. " 'Course, I'm not a detective," he said, "but it sure seems like you two are on to something. Maybe there *was* something rotten twenty years back."

"From Bowleg," Ken said to Sandy when they were once more in their room getting ready for bed, "that's quite an admission."

"That's about all the progress we've made." Sandy threw back the covers and stretched out just as they heard the telephone ring.

It rang for almost a minute before they heard Ma coming down the hall to answer it. A moment later she knocked on their door.

"Ken?"

"Yes, Ma." Ken shoved his bare feet into slippers and threw a robe over his pajamas. "Coming."

"It's for you."

"Gosh, Ma." Ken opened the door. "I'm sorry. You must have been asleep."

"It's all right, Ken. Good night." She shuffled off.

Sandy sat upright and waited until Ken returned a couple of minutes later. He shut the door behind him.

"Well?" Sandy asked.

"That was Banner. Their correspondent down near Mud Flat—a man named Jennings—dug up some stuff for us. We're to meet Jennings at Mud Flat at noon tomorrow—in a restaurant called the Six-Gun Cafe."

"Is Burton alive?"

"Banner says no."

Ken got into bed and turned off the light.

There was almost a half hour of silence and then Sandy mumbled. "Hundred and fifty miles. About four hours."

"I can't hear you."

Sandy sat up. "Know what?"

"No."

"Suppose somebody heard that call? And that would be easy because when the bell rings here it rings at the other three places too. They might not like us to get to see Jennings."

“And they think they have until noon tomorrow to stop us.” Ken, too, sat up. “But how could they? Kidnap Jennings or something?”

“Who knows what they might do?” Sandy said. “The idea is not to give them a chance. How would it be if we started out now and met Jennings at his office early in the morning, instead of at noon in Mud Flat?”

Ken thought this over a moment. He looked at the dial of his watch. “Twelve-thirty. Give us fifteen minutes to get out of here and about five hours to make the trip at night. We could be at Jennings’ office by six, and wait for him.” He swung his feet over the side of the bed. “Let’s go.”

When they let themselves out of the house they could see that Smith was still awake—at any rate, his light was still on. They skirted the patch of illumination and eased into the car. Behind them, the light went out and the darkness was complete.

Sandy turned the key on and stepped on the starter. The gears whined, but the motor didn’t catch. He tried it again, and then once more.

“That’s funny,” he said. “It was running perfectly when we came back from Denver.”

“Maybe it’s flooded,” Ken suggested.

Sandy sniffed. “Doesn’t smell like it.” He tried again with no luck.

Ken opened the door. “Shall we take a look under the hood?”

“Take us all night.” Sandy took the key out. “Let’s go back to bed. We’ll get up early and get a mechanic over to look at it.”

“Another coincidence?” Ken asked quietly.

CHAPTER X

BOOBY TRAP

Ken reached out and shut off the alarm clock before its clatter was ten seconds old; he had slept badly, on the verge of wakefulness. Still half out of bed, his hand resting on the clock, he leaned a little further and shook Sandy into sensibility.

Sandy groaned, opened one eye and looked at the clock. "Five already?"

Ken was sitting on his bed, stretching and grimacing to get himself fully awake. "Yes. And hurry up." He stripped his pajama coat off and reached for his clothes. "I'm going to run down to the service station to see if I can get someone to check the car."

Sandy dropped back on the bed. "That gives me another fifteen minutes."

"Do you get up, or do I use the cold-water cure?"

"You win." Sand) struggled out of bed and began to dress. He was still in his shorts when Ken slipped out.

Ten minutes later Sandy stepped out into the light, blinking as the low sun caught him full face. He could save time if he got the car out into the yard where the mechanic would have light and space to work in.

He released the hand brake and made sure the car was in neutral, and then, by bracing his feet against the end wall of the shed and his back against the bumper, he slowly forced the rear wheels to roll over the sill. Then the slight grade helped, and the convertible moved easily backward. He opened the driver's door and zipped up the hand brake.

Sandy's methodical mind began to turn over the possible *natural* causes of the engine's failure. And when he had discarded those, he went on to think about some *unnatural* causes. He reached inside and unlatched the hood, and then went to the front to lift it. At first glance nothing on the engine appeared to have been disturbed. But when he walked around to the right side to make a close inspection of the distributor system, a low whistle escaped him. His hand moved

forward to be checked in mid-air.

He got inside the car, inserted the key and stepped on the starter. The engine caught immediately and settled down into a contented purr. With a satisfied grin, Sandy leaped out, shut the hood, and got back behind the wheel.

At the highway he met Ken, trotting back to the inn, and brought the car to a quick stop. When Ken was inside, Sandy swung the car in a tight circle and headed back.

“What’d you do?”

“Nothing.” Sandy turned into the drive and gunned the motor up the slope, sliding around the corner of the house and stopping outside the back door to their room. “There was nothing wrong with it. Come on, take a look.”

Together they peered under the hood, Sandy’s hand pointing at but not touching the distributor. “See anything funny?”

“Nothing special,” Ken said slowly, “except it looks a little too clean—no dust.” He turned his head sideways to look at Sandy. “Did you have it off?”

“Didn’t touch it.” Sandy grinned. “Catch on?”

Ken nodded. “Someone took out the distributor rotor last night and put it back this morning.” He lifted his head to look over at the shed. “Where is Smith’s car?”

Sandy looked up startled. “Gosh! I didn’t even notice it was gone. Do you suppose ... ?” Then he laughed. “Look, chum, we’re getting punch drunk. We’ll be suspecting Banner next, or maybe the postmaster.”

Ken didn’t smile in return. “Somebody did this— somebody had to listen to the telephone call. There’s, an extension in the kitchen, and Smith’s light was on when we came out last night. How do we know he didn’t sneak out and pick up the receiver when the bell rang?”

“But not even Smith could have known we decided to go last night.”

“Let’s try something.” Ken shut the hood and together they went to the back porch. “I’m going inside and talk—quietly like we did last night. You stay out here by the window and listen.”

When he emerged again, Sandy was sober. “Heard every word.”

“It took us fifteen minutes to get out to the car after we decided to go,” Ken mused. “Someone here at the house—like Smith—would have had plenty of time to remove the rotor.”

Sandy took it from there. “And after he knew we’d given up the trip, he replaced it, and took off himself.” He sighed. “It could be, I suppose. But what could he do with Jennings?”

“Who knows? That well find out when we see him. And we’d better hurry up. I’ll leave a note for Ma on the kitchen table so she doesn’t worry about us.”

When Ken got into the car beside Sandy a few minutes later, he said, "There was another note on the table—from Smith. Said he'd gone fishing—an early start."

Sandy grunted. "Could be the truth, you know."

They pulled into Mud Flat at half past ten—a half hour before their appointment.

The town was even smaller than Mesa Alta, and about half of it was deserted. There was one unpaved and rutted street through which Sandy drove slowly, watching for the Six-Gun Cafe. It was in a weather-beaten wooden building, with the false front so typical of frontier architecture. Sandy edged the car in between a truck and an old station wagon and shut off the motor. Only an occasional clink of crockery from the cafe broke the silence, and behind them the dust they had raised still hung in the air.

"We ought to do a story about this town," Sandy said. "Wonder why anybody lives here."

"We can ask Jennings when he comes—if he comes."

"Nothing can happen to Jennings," Sandy said. But he, too, sighed quietly in relief when a car pulled up near them and the driver waved and came toward them.

"You must be Ken and Sandy, huh?" When they nodded, he went on, "I'm Jennings. Let's go inside and talk over some coffee, what say?"

They were the only customers and they settled themselves into a booth with three heavy mugs of coffee on the table before them.

"Now," Jennings said, after he had tasted the coffee, "I guess the quickest way is for me to tell you all I've managed to collect."

Ken nodded. "Shoot."

"I got most of this information from a real old-timer—Willy Morrison—down at the home for the aged." Jennings smiled. "Willy's a character—and knows it. He's one of the few remaining remnants of the old West. This town is, too. Matter of fact, they're thinking of restoring it to make a museum out of it—like Central City."

"They'd better hurry up before it falls down," Sandy said.

"Well, anyway, I saw Willy last night. He says Burton turned up when the town was wide open and plenty tough. He hung around a few weeks and then hooked up with Riegel's ranch. It was a small cow outfit, about five miles from here up Snake Hill Road."

"This doesn't look like good cattle country," Ken said. "More rocks and desert than grass."

Jennings grinned. "You're not kidding. And it wasn't any better back then. Willy says Riegel was a bad one—quick on the trigger and not too particular where he got his cows—or his cowhands. It was common knowledge that Riegel's boys spent most of their time

rustling cattle, but no one said anything about it—wasn't healthy."

"No law?" Sandy inquired.

"Not much. Mud Flat had become a hide-out for a lot of men who weren't too popular in the more civilized parts of the state."

"What happened to Burton after he joined Riegel?" Ken brought the conversation back.

Jennings looked down at his notes. "Next thing was that Burton bought out Riegel five years later."

"That must have taken money," Ken said. "Wonder where he got it."

Jennings shrugged. "It couldn't hav < * taken much. Willy says the ranch wasn't worth anything." He paused a moment. "But that wasn't the funny thing. You see, by that time the town was pretty legal. The tough characters had been killed off or had wandered away. Burton, Willy says, stayed inside the law, but he ran very few head of cattle—not enough to keep going on. He couldn't run much on that ranch, anyway."

"But ..." Ken prompted.

"He *did* get along somehow, and pretty well at that. Never seemed to lack money. He lived alone until he died about six years ago. The ranch has been abandoned ever since."

"A natural death?" Sandy asked.

Jennings smiled as he nodded. "He wasn't even found for a week, because nobody ever went to see him. But when he didn't show up in town for seven days, someone went up to take a look, and found him dead in his bed. Heart failure, the coroner said, but Willy claims he must have drunk himself to death."

"What had happened to Riegel?" Ken asked.

Jennings shook his head. "Willy says he and some of his boys just disappeared into thin air. Never heard of them again." He folded the paper and passed it across the table to Ken. "And that's about all. Hope it's useful."

"Might be," Ken said. "It's a little early to tell." He thought a moment. "Who owns Burton's house now?"

"I suppose the state got whatever he left—he died without a will." Jennings looked at his watch. "I've got to be moving on."

"One more thing," Ken said as they all stood up. "Where would the records of the ranch sale be kept—the deeds from Riegel to Burton?"

"In New City. That's the county seat."

They walked outside and accompanied Jennings his car. "One thing you might do while you're here," he advised, "is take a look at the old graveyard at the foot of this street where Snake Hill Road starts. If you want to get some real western flavor, read some of the headstones." He backed the car out and waved as he drove off.

Ken slid behind the wheel. "Nobody bothered Jennings after all. So

why all the monkey business with our car?"

"I wouldn't know," Sandy said dispiritedly. "Nothing seems to add up."

Ken drove slowly down the street.

"There's the graveyard," Sandy pointed to the right. "Let's take a look."

Ken pulled over and they got out—Sandy carrying the camera. They walked through the desolate-looking plot of land toward the wooden markers, most of which had fallen over.

Sandy laughed and stopped to set the camera. "Look at this."

The board was inclined at a crazy angle, but the letters, burned into it, were still readable.

HERE LIES FRANK WILLETS
HE DIED OF SIX BULLETS

"Doesn't rhyme very well," Sandy said. He pressed the button and wound the film.

"Here's another one." Ken had stopped ten feet ahead.

HERE LIES TED LUCE
HE DIED OF A NOOSE

Sandy took a picture of that one too. "That must have happened after the law got here."

"Hey!" Ken's shout rang across the deserted area. "Come here!"

Sandy joined him, looked, and whistled. "Well, what do you know!" The board was flat on the ground, but the inscription was clear.

UNDER HERE IS TOM MADDEN
HE PULLED A GUN AND WISHED HE HADN'T

"And look what's next to it!" Ken pointed to an adjoining marker.

MORT MADDEN LIES HERE
HE BORROWED A STEER

"Our Clint comes of a nice family," Jack said. He took the two pictures before he added, "If they are Clint's relatives."

"I don't think I'll walk up to him and ask him," Ken said, grinning. And then he sobered. "But for the first time something in this mess seems to make some sense. It looks as if Burton and Madden might have been neighbors. If they knew each other—if we could find some link between them ..."

"You don't suppose there'd be anything at the Burton house after all this time ..."

"Hold it!" Ken exclaimed. "Maybe that's why we were delayed—to

give someone a chance to remove evidence. Come on!”

The trail to the Burton house wound and climbed over sharp backbones of eroded rock and down into narrow gullies, and they could soon see the little town below them. Finally they emerged on a plateau and there, half a mile away, was a small cluster of buildings.

When they were within a thousand feet of it, Ken stopped. A rickety wooden bridge spanned a deep ravine that cut across the road.

“Think it’ll hold us?”

Sandy got out, walked onto the planks, and jumped tip and down to test them. Then he suddenly bent to look closely at the rough surface. “Hey! Come here.”

Sandy was pointing at tire tracks. “These look pretty fresh.” He got down on his knees and touched the imprint. “It’s loose dust—they couldn’t last very long.”

“I wonder what kind of tires Smith has on his car?” Ken mused.

Sandy trotted off behind their own car and bent over to look at its tracks. “I don’t think you could use that track for evidence,” he said, when he returned to the bridge. “We have the same kind.”

Ken nodded. “I suppose one-third of the cars on the road have this brand. But someone drove across, so I guess we can too.”

The bridge creaked and rattled, but it held, and a minute later Ken stopped in what was once the yard of Burton’s house. It was overgrown with stringy weeds and liberally besprinkled with rusted tin cans. A fence that once stood along the trail was flat, the few remaining bits of barbed wire crumbling away at a touch. The house was little more than a shell, the windows were missing, and the door hung loosely from one hinge. Part of the roof had fallen in and the tarpaper had been torn from that part which still remained. There was no sign that it had ever known the protection of a coat of paint.

They walked up the two steps to the porch cautiously. The top step splintered under them, but they avoided falling by jumping to the porch itself. Overhead, the roof creaked ominously.

Ken swung the door open wide, and the screech of the rusty hinge made them both jump.

Sandy looked around nervously. “No wonder they didn’t find him for a week. Who’d want to come out here?”

Ken ventured inside, stamping his foot on the sagging floor boards to test them. “Come on.”

A small animal scuttled across the floor, its claws making sharp clicking sounds.

“A rat,” Ken said. He advanced further into the room with Sandy crowding behind. There was no ceiling overhead and a rough board partition seemed to divide the structure into two rooms. There was nothing in the one they were in except a broken table, two chairs, and

a bed. The mattress was still in place on the spring, but the stuffing had come out and was hanging in ragged strands from the torn cover.

Sandy clutched Ken by the arm. "Look," and he found that he was whispering. He cleared his throat and spoke in a normal voice. "Footprints."

They led across the room to the doorway in the partition, and walking on tiptoes, the boys followed them to the opening. Ken paused momentarily and then looked through.

"All clear."

The second room contained another table, a stove, some cupboards, and an old bureau. The drawers of the bureau were open and even from where they stood they could see that there were papers in the top drawer—papers that had been strewn about. The footprints led to the bureau and from there to a back door which hung open.

It took only a moment to make sure that there was nothing of any value among the papers. There were some old bills, several circulars advertising cattle equipment, a long-outdated calendar, and an old ledger from which the pages had been ripped.

"Too late," Ken said.

"Let's see where they go." Sandy pointed to the footprints.

They walked into the daylight again, glad to get out from under the sagging roof, and followed the footprints across the back yard to a small outbuilding.

There were no windows in this building, and the doorway was small. Ken pulled the door open and they peered in. It was dim inside, and it took a moment for their eyes to become accustomed to the gloom. Then they could see that this was the pump house; in its far corner was a rusted mass of equipment recognizable as a water pump. An old gasoline engine stood near it. The interior smelled damp and rotted.

The footprints were still visible even on the wooden floor; they led to the machinery and there they turned around and came back to the door. But where they turned at the ruin of the old pump there was a little heap of charred fragments as if papers had been burned. As they looked, a breeze stirred the ashes, and they could see that the papers had not been entirely destroyed; a few yellowed pieces remained.

As one, the boys squeezed through the opening and started across the room. They were three feet from the door when the creaking started. They stopped and turned, but it was already too late. The floor gave away beneath them and they plunged through into the darkness below.

CHAPTER XI

A HUMAN BRIDGE

There wasn't time to cry out; there wasn't time to grab for anything that might stop their downward plunge. They fell, scraping past the ragged ends of the collapsed flooring to cleave the cold water that waited below. They came up fast—gasping and coughing— and floundered wildly as they fought for control.

"You all right?" It seemed hours before Sandy managed to gasp out the three words; actually it was only a matter of seconds.

"Yes. What is this?"

"I don't know. It looks like a well."

"It must be deep. I never touched bottom."

"Me neither."

"Take it easy, Sandy," Ken cautioned. "See, you can hang on to the stones without treading water. It'll save our strength."

For long seconds the pit was quiet, only their panting and the slight slap of water against the stone walls disturbing the tomblike silence. They looked up and saw that they were about eight feet below the level of the floor, in a circular shaft about five feet in diameter. The walls were made of smooth stones cemented in place and made even smoother by the years' accumulation of slime.

Sandy made a futile effort to claw at the stone.

"Don't!" Ken warned. "We'll never get out of here that way."

"We can't stay here forever." But Sandy subsided. "Brother—are we stupid! Both of us clomping across that rotten floor."

"I'm just beginning to realize how stupid we are," Ken said softly.

"And it's a good thing I did—in time."

Sandy snorted. "In time! You should have thought of this five minutes ago. Just because we see the footprints of one man, doesn't mean an old floor will support two people."

"That's not what I mean. Look what's right alongside of my shoulder."

"O.K. If you want to play games." Sandy squinted to see through the gloom. "Hey! We're all right—a rope!" He reached for it.

Ken chopped his arm away roughly. "Don't touch it!"

"What's the matter with you? Do you like it down here?"

"Get away from it." Ken snapped. "Think a minute. What brought us in here? Burned papers, wasn't it?"

"Sure. So ..."

"There's an old stove in the house, isn't there? So why burn papers here? And why leave a nice trail to follow? We've been taken—but good. Look up at that floor beam. Does that look rotten—or does it look as if it had been sawed almost all the way through?"

"This," Sandy said, after he looked up, "I don't like. I'm beginning to get mad."

"Save it for when it'll do some good. Right now, we have to figure a way out of this trap *without* touching the rope."

"The rope part I don't get." Sandy sounded stubborn as well as angry.

"Don't be a chump!" Ken was irritable. "Somebody's trying to get rid of us. Right?"

"Right. But the guy was dumb. He didn't check to see if there was anything in the well we could use to get out." Sandy lost his precarious grip on the stones and floundered around before he managed to find another crevice to get his fingers in. "So that's our good luck."

"What's the rope fastened to?" Ken had got hold of himself, and his voice was quiet and steady. "And how come there's a rope in the well, anyway—a pretty good rope at that. It doesn't show any signs of having been down here very long." His voice took on a sarcastic edge. "Doesn't that strike you as being a little *too* lucky?"

Sandy swallowed several times. "You mean ... you think that if we yank on it something might ..."

"I don't know. But I'm not going to pull it to find out. There must be another way out." He thought a moment. "I'm lighter than you are. Maybe you can hold on to the wall and let me climb up on your shoulders."

"We can try." Sandy hunted around until he found a deeper crevice and dug his fingers into it. "Go ahead."

Carefully, inch by inch, Ken drew himself up out of the water by placing his hands on Sandy's shoulders. Sandy clung to the slimy stone with all the force his powerful fingers could muster.

"It's no good," he gasped. "I'm slipping ..." The rest of his words were lost as his hands slipped off and Ken's weight drove his head beneath the surface of the water. Ken yanked him up, and they both clung to the wall, fighting for breath.

"I wasn't even halfway out." Ken gulped.

Sandy spoke suddenly. "Remember what we did to get aboard the

ferry? Maybe it'll work here."

"We didn't have this far to go." Ken looked up at the opening. "It's eight feet, at least."

"What have we got to lose?" Sandy was urgent. "Come on. I'll make a cradle for your feet."

"Over on this side—away from the rope," Ken directed.

Sandy laced his fingers together and Ken set one foot in the cupped hands under water.

"You're going way down when I lunge," Ken warned.

"O.K. I'll tell you when." Sandy took a deep breath. "Go!"

Ken straightened his leg with all the power he had; his body rose out of the water, and as it did, Sandy was driven down out of sight. Ken's fingers clawed wildly at the stones—and found nothing to hold on to. He missed the top by three feet and then fell back on top of Sandy, driving him under even farther. They both came up sputtering and spitting water.

Again they clung there, allowing the water to bear most of their weight, putting only enough strain on their hands to keep them from sinking.

"How long did you say we could hang here?" Sandy tried to sound cheerful, but the undercurrent of fear came through.

"A couple of days—maybe." Ken tried to be funny, too. "If we don't starve to death in the meantime."

A minute went by, and another, and then five more.

"I'm getting numb." Ken had to fight to keep his teeth from chattering. "It's a good thing this is July and not December."

"We have to do something—we just can't hang on long enough to be rescued." There was not even an attempt at banter in Sandy's voice. "Let's try the cradle again."

"No use, Sandy. I missed the top by feet."

"Maybe we ought to try the rope."

"No!"

"Well, got any other suggestions?" Sandy let his numbed hands slip off the stone and kept himself afloat by treading water. His flailing feet struck the wall across the shaft near the rope and he withdrew them hurriedly. But the momentary contact with the wall gave him an idea. "Move over to one side," he said to Ken. "I want to try something."

He stretched his feet out and straightened his body until he was wedged across, his feet pressing against the stones on one side, and his shoulders jammed against the other.

Sandy lifted his hands out of water. "Look, no hands. I can stay this way for hours and you can hang on to me."

Ken threw an arm across Sandy's chest. "Am I too heavy?"

"No effort at all." He wriggled his shoulders. "Let me find a more comfortable stone." The powerful muscles in his back worked as he edged this way and that. "There. That does it. Now we can wait."

"Do that again!" Ken spoke excitedly.

"Do what again?"

"Wriggle against the stones. Go on!"

"But I just found a good spot." But Sandy did as Ken asked; he moved his shoulders about, keeping his legs out straight and his feet jammed against the opposite side of the pit.

"You're moving up! You climbed a couple of inches!" Ken took his arm off Sandy. "That'll make it easier. Now move your feet up a couple of inches—one foot at a time."

Sandy took his full weight on his left leg and worked his right foot upward. Then he took his weight on his right leg and brought his left foot up. Only his heels were touching the water.

"Now your shoulders," Ken commanded. "Get them up some more."

Sandy obeyed, disregarding the pain of the stones cutting into his back. His body rigidly jammed across the shaft, he kept on wriggling. Now his back was out of water, his body suspended by its rigidity, his muscles knotted and taut. He moved his feet up again—they were completely out of water. Then his shoulders— then his feet.

"I've got to rest," he panted when he was six inches out of water.

"Can you hold on?"

"I think so, but I don't think I'll ever make the top— it's too far— it'll take hours at this rate."

Ken trod water, holding his hand under Sandy's back, trying to ease the burden on Sandy's legs and back as much as possible.

"Look, Sandy," he said. "Think you could support my weight?"

Sandy was dubious. "I'm not even sure I can keep myself up here very long."

"I know. But we've got to try it. It's our only chance."

"You want to stand on me, huh?"

"Yes. Wait until I get my shoes off." He tried to keep a light tone in his voice. "Never stand on your friends with your shoes on, my father always said." He threw them up toward the doorway eight feet above. "I'll need them later."

"O.K." Sandy spoke through clenched teeth and jammed himself against the stones even harder. "Climb aboard."

Ken threw his arms across Sandy's chest and began to work his body up out of the water. He was torn between a desire to move as rapidly as possible, and the fear that if he jounced too hard Sandy would slip from his precarious position. It took minutes of snakelike maneuvering for him to get his chest out of water. Then he slowly brought his legs up under him until his knees were resting on Sandy's stomach.

"You O.K.?" he asked.

"So far—but not for long."

"A little while longer—just hold on." Ken got his feet under him and crouched there on the human bridge. He could feel Sandy quiver under the strain, the tremendous diaphragm muscles knotting like rope. Slowly he drew himself erect, holding his breath as if that would lighten the load. He stretched out his arms to the fullest; his straining fingers were over a foot short of the edge of the well.

"I'm going to have to jump for it, Sandy. It'll drive you under again."

"Go ahead." The words were barely distinguishable from a groan.

This had to be it, Ken knew. There'd be no other chance—Sandy would be too tired a second time. He bent his knees and went down into a half crouch. His head was up, his eyes fixed on the stone rim his fingers would grab—if he were lucky. "Here goes," he said, more to himself than to Sandy.

His legs straightened out like pistons, and his body lunged upward. Even as his fingers grabbed for the rim, and caught, he heard Sandy grunt and splash back into the water. With infinite care he pulled himself upward, his fingers curved into claws around the rough stone. His stockinged feet fought for toeholds where there were none, and the muscles in his arms stretched until he felt sure they would let go.

But they didn't. He went up inch by inch; the top of his head passed the rim and then he could hook his chin on the stones and take a breath. From below came hard breathing as Sandy watched the struggle. Ken worked his elbows up over the edge and made one more effort. An instant later he fell forward on his chest, his face flat on the rough boards of the floor. He had made it.

"Nice going." Sandy could speak now—he could even laugh again. "Don't forget me, down here."

Ken wormed himself entirely free of the well. He wanted to lie there in the sun that came through the doorway, but he made himself get up. "Hold on for another couple of minutes. I'll be right back." He found his shoes, jammed his feet into them, and, unmindful of flapping shoelaces, streaked across the yard for the car, silently thanking Pop Allen for having insisted that they carry a towrope.

He was back in less than a minute, the new line coiled in his hand. "Slip it around you, under your arms," he called down. "I'll take the strain and you can walk up the wall."

A moment later Sandy's grinning face appeared over the edge and then he, too, was out.

"Never thought I'd see that again," he said, pointing to the hot sun. "Feels good."

"Let's get these clothes off." Ken began to unbutton his shirt.

“They’ll dry in an hour out here.”

“I’ll get that pup tent out of the car to lie on while we wait.” When Sandy came back carrying the tent, Ken had taken off all his clothes and had spread them around in the sun. Sandy grinned at him.

“There’s only one thing I want to do before I start my sun bath. I’m going to try that rope. If you were wrong—I’m going to throw you back down the well.”

Barefooted, Ken walked gingerly over to the doorway. He grinned at Sandy over his shoulder. “I’m wondering about that myself. Down in the hole, it sounded good.”

“Down there anything sounded logical.” With a loose board; Sandy fished for the rope from across the open well. He snared it and pulled it within reach so Ken could catch hold of it.

“You and your ideas,” Sandy snorted. He pointed to the end of the line where it was fastened to the rusted water pump about a foot from the edge of the shaft. “Think we could move that thing! It must weigh a thousand pounds.”

“O.K. So throw me down the well.” Ken gave the line a tug. “Seems solid enough.” He looked shamefaced.

“Here,” Sandy said. “Give it to me. We would have pulled harder than that.” He threw a little of his weight on the line.

The water pump tilted a little and rocked. Sandy tugged a bit harder. The ponderous mass of old metal rocked in a wider arc and then, before their popping eyes, it rolled over slowly, and with a crash and a hollow roar, it fell into the well. The water splashed high as the pump vanished beneath the surface.

CHAPTER XII

A SECOND ATTEMPT

For two hours they lay on the canvas while the hot sun drew the water out of their clothes and some of the terror out of their minds.

They talked, first feverishly and without control, but later settling down to make some concrete plans. There wasn't any doubt that someone had tried to eliminate them. And they knew that this marked a new turn in the game. Up to now they had been bothered in little ways. Now someone had turned on the heat in earnest.

"Except," Sandy pointed out, "for that little detail of the falling rock. Whoever did that meant business."

"Maybe that was to warn us to keep away," Ken said. "After all, we didn't know a thing at the time— what danger were we to anybody?"

"And the only one around was Tommy" Sandy rolled over on his back and then sat up. "And we're pretty well convinced that the Wilsons aren't involved in what's happened since then."

Ken nodded. "The falling rock is one incident that doesn't quite fit the pattern. When we get the answers to the big question, that'll clear up too." He looked at his wrist watch. "Dad must have had something like this in mind when he gave us these waterproof watches. It's three o'clock. If we want to get to the County Clerk's office before it closes we'd better get a move on." He felt his shirt. "Dry."

"Our shoes aren't."

"They'll dry on us." Ken got into his clothes and then sat down again to work his damp shoes over his feet. "If we looked any worse, they'd never let us in the office."

But the aged attendant in the County Clerk's office paid no attention to their wrinkled appearance. It took him a little while to find the documents they wanted, but eventually he turned up with a folder which he handed across the counter.

"Can't take 'em out of the building. But you can look at them over there." He indicated a long table near the window at the far end of the large room.

"Can we photograph them?" Ken asked.

The attendant shrugged. "Seein' as how anybody can look at 'em, I don't see why you can't take a picture if you want to. Don't spoil 'em, though."

There was no mention of the amount of money involved in the transaction between Burton and Riegel, and after they had gone slowly through the legal phrases, they felt they didn't know any more than they had known earlier. But when they turned to the last page and saw the signatures, their interest quickened. There, in sprawling letters, was Rex Burton's name, and right above it, much neater and more precise, was the signature of John Riegel. Opposite these names were the signatures of the witnesses. One was an ornate swirl of letters which they finally deciphered as Charles Jackson. The other, although hard to read, gave them no trouble because it was a name they knew—Clint Madden.

They looked at each other solemnly; Madden and Burton had known each other, all right.

Ken whistled softly, and then, realizing that he was in a dignified public building, stopped. "If Burton testified for Wilson against Raymond," he said softly, "why should Madden—a friend of Raymond's—act as a witness in this transfer of property? Madden should have been plenty mad at Burton—too mad to get near him let alone act as a witness for him. Unless ..."

"Maybe Madden was Riegel's witness—not Burton's." Sandy completed Ken's thought.

"And in that case, I'd like to know where Mr. Riegel is. There are a couple of questions I'd like to ask him." Ken pointed to the camera. "Shoot this signature page, Sandy. We might want to compare some handwriting."

"You don't suppose our friend Raymond could *be* John Riegel?" Sandy was focusing his camera on the document spread out flat on the table. "John Riegel— John Raymond. Same initials ... Madden knew both of them."

"A very interesting supposition—and one that reminds me we have something else to do right away." Ken looked around the room until he saw a telephone booth. "I'm going to call the inn. You go ahead and photograph the signatures."

"Be careful what you say," Sandy cautioned.

"Don't worry."

Ken returned before Sandy had quite finished. "Got Bowleg and told him we wouldn't be home for supper. Then I asked him to call us back from a pay telephone. I'll wait for the call."

"Finished with the papers?"

Ken nodded. "Give them back to the clerk. I'll be in the telephone booth."

He was in there almost ten minutes before he emerged. "Whew—it's hot. Let's get something to eat and I'll tell you what I found out."

There was a nice, quiet restaurant half a block from the building. If the waiter was surprised at the size of their order, he managed to control himself.

Sandy spread a thick layer of butter on a piece of bread. "Here it is half past four and we haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

"I figure we're lucky to be eating at all," Ken said, but there was no humor in his voice. He looked around to reassure himself that there was nobody near them. "When Bowleg called back I said something funny had happened, but that before I told him what, I wanted him to tell me if he'd seen any sign of either Raymond, Madden, or Smith early in the morning."

"Well?"

"Unless he's lying, everybody has an alibi—and that includes Bowleg and Wilson too. Bowleg was up at Wilson's by seven this morning, helping him reshingle the house roof. They were there until noon."

Sandy made some rapid calculations and then looked up. "We got that call from Banner about midnight, so the person who overheard it and beat us to Mud Flat couldn't have started before then. Even if we figure that he knew the road, he couldn't make the hundred and fifty miles in under three and one-half hours—not when you figure that rough section from Mud Flat to Burton's house."

"Check. So the best anybody could do would be to get back to Mesa Alta by eight in the morning, and that only allows him one hour to fix up that booby trap."

Sandy reached for another slice of bread as the waiter appeared with a huge platter on which a steak was sizzling. Sandy divided the steak into two equal parts, set one on Ken's plate, and took the remainder himself. The waiter returned with the potatoes and a green salad, and retrieved the empty steak platter.

Sandy sighed happily as his teeth closed around a bite of the tender, rare meat. "Don't say anything for a couple of minutes," he mumbled. "I wouldn't pay any attention, anyway."

When their hunger pangs had been slightly blunted, Sandy asked, "What about Raymond and Madden?"

"That's the trouble. Bowleg says he and Wilson saw them right after they'd started working on the shingles. He says it couldn't have been later than quarter after seven."

Sandy laid down his fork to heap some more potatoes on his plate. "He's sure?"

Ken nodded. "Both he and Wilson remarked on it. Raymond and his foreman were out inspecting fences —Bowleg says that from the roof

top it was easy to see them.”

“Which brings us back to Smith—the man whose car was missing this morning, the person who could have overheard us easily last night, and the one voted most likely to succeed in fixing up our car.” Sandy leaned back triumphantly. “Now, let’s go see Mr. Smith.”

“Hold on a minute. He’s got an alibi—he was fishing.”

“Why? Just because he left a note saying so?”

Ken shook his head. “No—because he came in at nine with a fine batch of fish. There wouldn’t have been nearly enough time to catch them if he had been in Mud Flat.”

“Maybe he bought them?” Sandy was reluctant to give up his idea.

“Sure.” Ken grinned. “We made that trip this morning. Did we pass any towns big enough to have fish stores? No.”

“Maybe he caught them the day before and saved them for this alibi?”

“How would he know he would need one?” Ken asked. “And do you think you could fool Bowleg with day-old fish?” He pushed back his empty plate and sighed. “No. Let’s face it. Smith doesn’t seem to have been able to do it.”

Sandy drained the last of his coffee. “O.K. So Smith didn’t do it, and no one else seems to have done it. So maybe it wasn’t done. Maybe we just dreamed about it.” He pulled out a fold of his wrinkled shirt. “I suppose we got our clothes wet in the rain.”

Ken grinned. “Getting mad, huh?”

“Yes. I don’t like being pushed around—and I like being pushed down wells even less. What are we going to do about it?”

Ken sobered. “I’m not sure. I keep thinking I’m on the verge of remembering something—but when I try to put it in words, I lose it.”

“Something we saw—heard?”

Ken shook his head helplessly. “I don’t know. It’s like when you dream you’re just about to catch something—and it keeps getting away.”

“Well, I hope you wake up before somebody puts us to sleep permanently.” Sandy beckoned to the waiter. “Let’s get our check and go home—if we are going home.”

Ken looked at his watch. “We’re supposed to meet Bowleg at the gas station at ten—and we’d better make tracks. We’re all going up to the Wilsons’.”

When they arrived at ten-thirty, Chet Wilson and his son were waiting for them, the man noncommittal,

Tommy bright-eyed and expectant. He could hardly keep from breaking out in a rash of questions before Ken could explain the purpose of this visit.

No one interrupted him as he presented a direct and to-the-point

description of what had happened to them since the telephone call from Hank Banner the night before. There was a moment of silence when he finished, as Bowleg and the Wilsons digested the information.

“Never did like that Burton.”

Wilson looked at Bowleg. “You’ve said that before— lots of times. But that doesn’t mean anything one way or the other. Let’s see what we’ve got.” He looked at Ken. “Correct me if I’m wrong. You’ve got evidence that Burton knew Riegel, and that Burton knew Madden. You’ve got some evidence—not too much—that somebody rigged that trap for you. You conclude then that you’re getting too close to something—so close that somebody has been driven to the point of trying to get rid of you.”

“If you’d seen that pump go down the well,” Sandy muttered, “you wouldn’t doubt the evidence of the booby trap.”

Wilson shrugged. “I’m not doubting it. In fact, I believe it so much that I’m warning you two to stop fooling around before you get hurt. Let your father handle this when he comes. But as far as I’m concerned, it still doesn’t mean much. There’s no reason why Burton shouldn’t have known Madden and Riegel. Mud Flat was a small town—everybody knew everybody else. As for Madden being a witness—” he shrugged. “So what? You yourself suggested that he might have been Riegel’s friend—not Burton’s. And you haven’t connected anything so far with Raymond, and after all he’s the man who profited by the land case.”

“I’ve got an idea about ...” Ken stopped as the dog rose quickly and walked to the door where his hair rose and he growled menacingly.

“Quiet!”

The dog looked around at his master and then went right back to his growling. He barked several times, short, nasty sounds that started deep in his throat.

“Get back. Lie down!” Wilson snapped out the commands. The dog looked at him and then reluctantly left his post and sank down on the floor, but his ears were up stiff, and his nose was quivering.

“I was saying,” Ken continued, “that we had an idea about that. Suppose Riegel and Raymond are the same person?”

“Got any proof?” Wilson seemed more alert than they’d ever seen him.

“Riegel’s signature is on that property transfer. We took a picture of it. Have you got anything in your papers with Raymond’s signature on it? We could compare them.”

“There must be something in those papers,” the rancher said. He started to turn and then stopped. “When will you have that negative developed?”

“By tomorrow morning,” Sandy answered.

“No use plowing through that mess now, in that case. I’ll have it ready tomorrow for you. I’ll bring it over to the inn.”

“Fair enough,” Ken said. “We might have to take it to Denver and let a handwriting expert give us an opinion.”

The dog almost knocked Bowleg over in an effort to get out of the door, but he was checked by a word from Wilson and slunk back again. Tommy hooked a hand in the animal’s collar as they left.

“I think Chet’s right,” Bowleg grunted as he swung the car around and headed toward the town. “You two better watch your step.”

Ken snapped his fingers. “Hold it! Turn around, Bowleg. I just remembered something I have to ask Wilson.”

Bowleg applied the brakes hard. “Good thing you remembered now. Another hundred feet and we’d be going down the hill where the road’s too narrow to turn around.” He turned the small car around and headed back. “Guess Chet’s ...”

The car swung wildly toward the right and lurched heavily. Bowleg fought the wheel, trying to pull the car back in line, but he couldn’t. There was a thud and the car slewed around and stopped, the right fender tipped way down.

The door of the house opened and Wilson and Tommy ran out followed by the dog.

“What’s the trouble?”

Bowleg got out of the car. “Darned if I know.” He walked around to look at the right front wheel. “The wheel’s off!”

Tommy turned on a flashlight and hunted around. “Here it is.” He rolled it back into the glare of the headlights. “The hubcap’s still on.”

“That’s funny,” Bowleg said. “I had both front wheels off last week to grease the bearings. They were all right then.”

“Must have forgotten to put the cotter pin back,” Wilson said. “I’ll go get a jack.”

“No, I didn’t!” Bowleg was prying at the hubcap.

“Maybe it broke,” Tommy suggested.

Bowleg got the hubcap off and fished around in the grease for the wheel nut. “Maybe it did.” He pulled out the nut and then continued to search for the broken cotter pin. After a minute he looked up. “There’s no cotter pin in here—broken *or* whole. And it couldn’t have gotten out of the hubcap.”

“Maybe that’s what the dog was barking about.” Ken came forward and stood looking down at the wheel. “Where would we have been if you hadn’t turned around, Bowleg?” Ken’s voice was shaky.

“About halfway down the hill, I suppose.” He looked up at Ken and suddenly got it. “Just about where the road’s good and narrow and where there’s nothing between it and the creek three hundred feet down!”

CHAPTER XIII

THE EAVESDROPPER IDENTIFIED

In the harsh glare from the headlights the five faces looked grim and taut.

Sandy broke the silence. "Need more evidence, Mr. Wilson?"

Wilson shook his head and spoke to Tommy. "Get the jack and give Bowleg a hand to get that wheel back on." To Ken and Sandy, he went on. "Come back in the house."

"All right," he said, when they were seated around the table. "What do you know that's dangerous? You must know something you haven't told me."

"Not a thing." Ken looked a little weary. "But they must *think* we know something—or think we're getting too close for comfort. They're certainly keeping an eye on us all the time. They must have overheard my first phone call to Bowleg this afternoon."

"I thought you said you were careful about that call," Wilson said. "Didn't you just ask Bowleg to call you back from a pay phone?"

Ken nodded. "And they couldn't have listened in on that conversation. But it probably made them suspicious enough to keep an eye on Bowleg all afternoon. They must have seen us meet him at the gas station and then sneaked up here to loosen the wheel."

"Nothing you told me so far seems important enough for that." Wilson nodded in the direction of Bowleg's car. "Or for that business of the well." He filled his pipe as he spoke. "Raymond's too smart to do things like that. Getting rid of you wouldn't help him any—if he is involved in this. It would only make it worse. There'd be all sorts of investigations—official investigations."

"Not if it was an accident." Sandy underlined the last word. "And if we were found in the well or at the bottom of the ravine, it would look like an accident, wouldn't it?"

Wilson put the pipe on the table. "O.K. Let that ride for the present. What did you come back for?"

"I want to look at that letter Burton wrote to your father."

Wilson dropped the big envelope on the desk. When they found the

letter, Ken looked at the postmark and smiled. "They always make mistakes some place." He looked up at Wilson. "What date was the subpoena issued—the one ordering your father into court?"

"I'm not sure, but it's there some place." He spread the papers around and picked up the legal document. "Here—September 16."

"Any telephones around here then?"

Wilson looked at Ken curiously. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"How fast could a letter from here reach Mud Flat?"

Wilson shrugged. "Who knows? Three or four days, anyway. It had to go to Denver first." He sat down, an irritable look on his face.

"What are you driving at? You sound like a district attorney questioning a murder suspect."

"I wish I could convince you once and for all that there was something fishy about that lawsuit." Ken, too, was getting irritable. "I'm going to show you that there was something wrong about your friend Burton rushing up here to testify in your behalf. I know you don't—"

"Hold it, son. Take it easy." Bowleg and Tommy had entered in time to hear most of Ken's outburst. "The boy's right, Chet," Bowleg continued. "You've been stubborn long enough. Get off your high horse and lend a hand."

"A lot of talk, that's all." Wilson wasn't cowed by Ken, nor convinced. "What's wrong with Burton coming up here? Where's the tie between Raymond and Burton and Madden? Just because Madden witnessed the transfer of some ranch down in Mud Flat ..."

Ken stopped him by throwing Burton's letter down on the table. "Look at the postmark on the envelope."

Wilson picked it up and held it under the light to see better. "September 16." He looked up. "So what does that—?"

"Maybe *you* can explain how Burton down in Mud Flat knew you were going to court as quickly as you knew it yourself?" Ken went on, "I think he knew about it *before* you did. I think he had a hand in planning the whole thing. I think that's how he got the money to buy that ranch—he was paid off for his part in the deal."

Wilson sat down slowly, and the hand that reached for his pipe shook. He picked up the letter again and looked at the postmark. He looked at the date on the subpoena.

Bowleg spoke softly. "He's getting off that horse, son." He chuckled. "Some fur's going to fly pretty soon, I reckon."

"But how did they do it?" Wilson asked quietly. "They couldn't have moved the boundary markers."

Ken ignored the question. "Why did you fight the case the way you did? Why didn't you contest the boundary instead of trying to prove intent?"

Wilson was a bewildered man. He shook his head slowly. "I was only a kid then, seventeen years old. I don't know why, except that our lawyer said that was the way to do it. He said that with Burton's testimony it would be easy to prove intent—that we always shared the water."

"*With Burton's testimony,*" Sandy snorted. "Some help! Where is this brilliant lawyer? We'd better talk to him."

"He's gone," Bowleg said. "He moved to Denver a couple of years after the suit. I heard he died about ten years ago."

"Maybe his records are still around," Sandy persisted. "Who was he?"

Bowleg answered. "Seems like it was Jackson, I recall, wasn't it Chet?"

"Jackson!" Ken almost shouted.

"Wasn't that the name—?" But Sandy was interrupted by Ken's frantic search through the papers on the table.

"That's it!" Ken's fingers flipped the papers. "That's what I couldn't remember, Sandy. I saw that name on an envelope in this stuff some place. Got it!" He read aloud the name in the upper left corner. "Charles Jackson, Attorney."

"I don't understand," Wilson said. "What about Jackson?"

"Oh, brother," Sandy said softly. "You really *were* taken for a ride."

"Charles Jackson was the other witness on the Riegel property transfer," Ken explained. "Does it tie up, or doesn't it? Burton fixes up the boundary somehow, and then comes back to testify so that your lawyer, who's in on the deal, can fight the case on the grounds of intent. That stops any investigation of the boundary itself —no one even questions it."

"What started all this?" Wilson asked. "You come out here to do a story about something that happened before you were born, and now ..."

Sandy grinned. "You know about the great oaks growing from little acorns. If some rocks hadn't fallen that first day we were here, we wouldn't have become suspicious."

Tommy spoke up for the first time. "I can explain that! Ken and Sandy swung around to look at him. "You?" Ken asked.

Tommy nodded. "It was an accident. I climbed over the hill to watch you leave and my foot slipped and loosened a rock. Then a lot of them came down."

Ken let out his breath with a sigh. "So *that's* explained. And all this time we thought it tied up with the other stuff that's been going on. Only an accident."

"But the rest of it wasn't accidental." Wilson got to his feet, the bewilderment on his face replaced by hardness. "You two have stuck

your necks out far enough. I'll take it from here on in. You're going to let people know you're finished with the story—at least until your father gets here. Maybe they'll stop gunning for you."

Bowleg nodded vehemently. "He's right." He turned to Wilson. "Maybe we'll pay Raymond a little visit, huh, Chet?"

"Might be a good idea." Wilson walked to the chest and pulled a drawer open. When he turned around he had a gun in his hand and was twirling the cylinder to make sure it was fully loaded. "Haven't hefted this thing for a long time—feels good."

"Wait a minute!" Ken was on his feet. "That's not going to help. What can you prove by getting into a fight with Raymond and Madden?"

"It'll make me feel a lot better," Wilson said bitterly, "about the twenty years ..."

"Sit down, Chet!" Bowleg rapped the words out, and Wilson obeyed. "These boys have found out more in a couple of days than we did in years of stewin' around. Listen to what they've got to say."

"As I see it," Ken continued, "we can't do a thing until we discover how the boundary was shifted." He looked around the circle of faces. "I take it we're agreed it was shifted." Ken took the silence for assent. "And even before that, we have to find the motive— why did they go to all that trouble? Not for the water alone—there's enough water for both ranches, isn't there?"

Wilson nodded. "There always was when my father and Wright were operating."

"How much land did Raymond pick up as a result of the lawsuit?" Sandy asked.

"Hard to say, exactly," Bowleg answered. "Maybe an extra hundred acres of good grazing land."

Ken shook his head. "That's a lot, but would it be enough reason for all this?"

"He got more than that." Wilson had laid the gun on the table and was toying with it absently. "Don't you remember, Bowleg? The new line cut Davis and Brown out of water too. He bought their ranches for almost nothing." He smiled bitterly. "He made them the same offer he made my father—about one quarter of what the land was worth."

"Yep, I remember. Picked up a couple of thousand acres, I guess."

Ken leaned forward excitedly. "Now it begins to make some sense. Your father fired Burton. Burton wants revenge and figures out a way to get it. But he doesn't have enough money to swing it because it involves buying the Wright ranch. So he makes a deal with Riegel. When Wright died, Riegel bought in the property, knowing that he could go to court and cut three ranches away from water rights. He figured that he could buy them in cheap. He got away with it with

two of them, but your father was too stubborn.”

“Course!” Bowleg took a hand in the discussion. “That’s why he wouldn’t take your father’s offer to buy back the land. If Raymond was honest, he’d a made the deal. But no—he was trying to force you out.”

“Seems like we have enough evidence,” Wilson said. “When we put everything together it makes sense.”

Ken shook his head. “Not until we know how they fixed the boundary. You’d be laughed out of court without that information.”

“How are we going to find that out?”

“I don’t know, yet,” Ken said. “But it’s got something to do with the missing pictures—it must, or they wouldn’t have bothered stealing them.”

“And we still don’t know who did that,” Sandy reminded him. “Or who went through our luggage.”

“Or who rigged up that pump trap,” Ken added. “Smith still seems the most likely person, except that he’s got an alibi.”

“And he has no connection with Raymond,” Sandy pointed out.

“What do you suggest?” Wilson was prowling around the room again.

“We have to find those pictures,” Ken said. “And we have to check that handwriting to prove that Riegel and Raymond are the same person.” He, too, stood up. “After that, we’ll see.”

“O.K. I’ll play along. But on one condition.” Wilson leaned on the table. “Until your father gets here and can take the responsibility himself, Bowleg or I will keep close to you all the time.”

Sandy grinned. “That’s not going to make me mad.”

Wilson looked through the papers still spread out on the table. “Here,” he said to Ken. “Take this letter from Raymond so you can compare the signatures.”

It was difficult to act naturally with Smith the next morning at breakfast, but that gentleman seemed his usual affable self as he chatted about fishing and chided Bowleg for having missed supper the night before.

“I did all right at the Wilsons’,” Bowleg assured him. “Tommy’s one of the best fishermen around here.”

The boys weren’t paying too much attention to the conversation. They’d had little sleep, because they’d stayed up and developed the roll of film; they were pretty sure that the handwriting of the two signatures proved that Riegel was Raymond.

Even the tinkle of the telephone bell didn’t arouse them, but Smith’s sudden outbreak of coughing did. He staggered from the table just as Ma came back to summon Ken to the phone.

“Watch the kitchen extension,” Ken whispered as he passed Sandy

on his way to the telephone. Sandy ignored Ma's questioning look and left the dining room to wander into the kitchen. He ran some water and made himself drink it to kill time, and managed to stay there until he heard Ken returning to the dining room. They had no sooner sat down when the telephone rang a second time.

"I'll get it, Ma," Ken suggested. "It's my turn."

He was back before Sandy could think up some excuse for going into the kitchen again.

Smith came into the room at the same time, his eyes red. "Sorry."

Ken was smiling broadly. "A wire from my father. He'll be at the Denver airport tomorrow evening at six. And I was just thinking about wiring *him*, to say that the fishing"—he carefully avoided Sandy's eyes—"was getting real good around here."

"So it is." Smith beamed. "So it is."

Ma stood up. "If you're going into town, Mr. Smith, could I go along?"

"Certainly."

"Will you put the cream and butter in the refrigerator, Bowleg?" she asked. "I'll do the shopping, and you can pick me up in half an hour."

Ken poured himself another cup of coffee while Sandy helped Bowleg clear the table. Again he had the sensation of something just eluding his consciousness—something that had struck a bell in his mind. When he heard the crash from the kitchen, he shoved his chair back and ran out. "What's the matter?"

Bowleg was standing at the open door of the refrigerator with Sandy beside him. At their feet lay a shattered cream pitcher in a pool of heavy cream. But Bowleg was staring at three cleaned trout that lay in the tray directly beneath the ice-cube compartment.

He picked one up and looked at it, poking delicately at the flesh. Then he dropped the fish back in the tray.

"*Smith's got no alibi*," he said. "He never caught those fish in a stream. He bought them."

"Where? There are no fish stores around here." But Sandy's grin was triumphant.

"There's a hatchery five miles down the road where they sell trout."

"How can you tell if it's a hatchery fish?"

Bowleg was impatient. "Hatchery fish are fed horse meat—their flesh is white and soft. A brook trout has pinkish flesh and it's firm." He slammed the door shut. "He never caught those in any stream around here."

But Ken wasn't listening to the last words—the will-of-the-wisp idea that had been chasing itself around in his head had popped into full view as if the bang of the door had shaken it loose. "Those coughing spells—Smith had two of them that we know of. Both just when the

telephone rang. Remember?" Ken looked at them questioningly.

He went on. "The other time was when Bowleg answered the telephone. This morning Smith had another attack and left the room when the bell rang."

"So what?"

"Come on," Ken said. "Let's trace the wires from the telephone in the living room to the one here in the kitchen."

They traced them from the living room to the dining room and then into the wide passageway that led to the kitchen. There was a large sideboard there, in which Ma kept napkins and silverware; the wires ran behind it.

"Isn't Smith's room on the other side of this wall?" Ken asked.

Bowleg nodded.

"Give me a hand." Ken began to tug at the heavy piece of furniture. Together they moved it two feet from the wall and Ken squeezed into the space. He backed out a minute later. "Look behind there."

It wasn't difficult to get his point this time. Two slender wires had been attached to the telephone wires. The thin strands ran through the wall.

Bowleg opened the door of Smith's room and led the way to a bureau that was backed up against the interior wall. He pulled it out a foot and looked behind. Then he opened the top drawer of the bureau. Nestled there on a shirt was a small telephone receiver. Sandy put forward a hand.

"Hold it!" Ken checked him. "Dust it for prints and photograph whatever you find. I've got a hunch they'll match the prints on our luggage and on the window sill." He turned to go. "But clean up afterward—we don't want him to know we've been in here."

"Where are you going?" Sandy asked.

"I'm going to see where Smith goes." Ken began to move toward the door, continuing to speak as he went. "That first call was from Mrs. Buck. She said she has a lot of old newspapers in her attic. I made a date for three-thirty this afternoon, but now I'm worried. Smith knows about it, too."

CHAPTER XIV

THE RED SHIRT

When Ken returned fifteen minutes later, they were waiting for him, their job done.

"It's tying up fine." Ken threw himself on the bed. "Just as I reached the highway I saw Smith's car going northward. I was afraid to follow him, so I cut through the town and took the road to Wilson's."

He turned to Bowleg. "You know the place on the ledge where you can see Raymond's house? Well, I stopped there and watched through the binoculars." Ken grinned. "And, sure enough, in a couple of minutes Smith's car comes into view, traveling like a streak, right to Raymond's place. He's still there, so far as I know."

"But what about Mrs. Buck?" Sandy asked. "Suppose they try ..."

"They won't." Ken spoke confidently. "Not in daylight." He suddenly remembered. "Get any prints?"

Sandy patted the camera. "In here—good ones."

Bowleg began to prowl again. "I don't like this business about Mrs. Buck. She's a pretty old lady—they might try something. Maybe I'd better—"

Ken broke in. "If they heard part of my conversation with her, they must have heard all of it. Mrs. Buck told me that she was leaving for Denver on the five o'clock bus to visit her son. They know our appointment is for three-thirty o'clock. We have to figure out what we'd do in their place."

"That's easy," Sandy said. "Just keep us away from Mrs. Buck."

"How?" Ken asked. "They're not going to kidnap us."

"Send us off on a wild-goose chase," Sandy offered.

Ken nodded. "That would do it—something that would take us away, out of town probably—until it was too late to see her."

"If you're smart enough to figure that out," Bowleg said, "can you figure a way to get around it?"

"I don't think we ought to get around it," Ken answered. "I think we ought to fall into their trap *after* we've seen what Mrs. Buck has in her attic. Our job is to get to Mrs. Buck earlier—and do it without Smith,

Raymond, Madden, or any of their crowd knowing it.”

Sandy leaned back on the bed and made himself comfortable. “All we need, master mind, is a pill to make us invisible.”

“Let’s work backward from three-thirty,” Ken suggested after some thought. “That’s when they’ll want us out of circulation. My idea is that they’ll think up some scheme to get us away from town about two o’clock, and just make it impossible for us to get back in time.”

“But how are we going to get to Mrs. Buck’s place earlier without them knowing it?” Sandy asked.

Ken snapped his fingers. “Look, anything *we* suggest that’ll fall into their plans, they’ll snap at. Suppose we ask Smith to go fishing with us. Since that’ll keep us busy and under his eyes, he should agree, huh?”

“Sure, but how’ll we get away?”

“We can’t,” Ken said. “Bui *I* may be able to.” He spoke to Bowleg. “The creek winds and twists down there between the third and fourth tunnel. Suppose we go there and I sort of drift off a little so that I’m partly hidden by the rocks and the trees.”

“You’ll never get away with it,” Bowleg said flatly.

Ken went on. “But suppose I wear my bright red lumberman’s shirt that shows up so well. And suppose you have Tommy hidden there, so that when I drift away out of plain sight he can put that shirt on and keep fishing. Sandy can keep Smith occupied so that he doesn’t come close enough to spot the difference.”

Bowleg thought a moment. “I can have my car there—I’ll drive up after you’re already fishing—and I can run you into town and back again when you’ve finished.”

“He’ll hear your car,” Sandy said, thinking of that noisy rattletrap.

“Not over the noise of the creek,” Ken pointed out. He stopped and cocked his head to listen better. “Here comes Smith.” He looked at his watch. “It’s ten o’clock, Bowleg, you better disappear. Get Tommy hidden and be there yourself by eleven.”

When Smith came in the back door he found the boys in the kitchen mopping up the pool of cream.

“What happened?”

Ken looked up at him. “Just dropped the cream pitcher.”

“How’s your cough?” Sandy asked.

“Better,” Smith said. “Nothing like a little fresh air to clear it up.” He sat down on a kitchen chair. “That’s why I like fishing so much.”

Ken finished mopping and rinsed out the cloth. “That’s an idea. What about some fishing, Sandy?”

“Sounds good to me.” He helped himself to a cookie and leaned against the sink. “Where?”

“I could show you where I got those beauties,” Smith offered.

Ken shook his head. "Not for us. We've got a date up above the town with a big one that's been teasing us every time we tried."

"Wouldn't mind a crack at him myself," Smith said casually.

"Well, I don't know." Ken spoke as if he were weighing the fate of the world. "Sandy tried last time and now it's my turn."

"Suppose I just go along," Smith said, his voice persuasive. "You can have first crack at him, and if you don't land him in an hour, let me have a try."

Ken turned to Sandy. "What do you think?"

"Sounds fair enough to me."

"Swell." Smith jumped to his feet. "I'll get my stuff together."

Smith's eyes almost popped out of his head when he caught sight of Ken's flaming red shirt. "Where did you get that thing?"

Ken grinned. "Thought I'd try and dazzle that big one."

They stopped about halfway between the third and fourth tunnels, and Ken fished an envelope out of his pocket to put half a dozen worms in it. "Now you two stay away from that pool."

Smith checked the time. "It's ten thirty-five. Well give you until noon." He turned to Sandy. "Where are you going to fish?"

Sandy pointed toward the fourth tunnel. "I'm going up there a way to make sure Ken doesn't claim I bothered him." By separating widely, they would make it more difficult for Smith to watch both of them.

They clambered over the edge of the ravine and made their way down to the water. Ken turned to walk south, toward the town, while Sandy began to move northward. Smith stood still, trying to make up his mind which way to go. He moved irresolutely toward Ken, but before he had taken two steps, Sandy was calling to him.

"No fair. Ken gets an hour alone."

Ken was fifty feet away by this time, visible only by occasional flashes of the bright shirt. He stopped now. "O.K. This is where I go to work."

Smith went along with Sandy for a hundred feet, turning now and then to glance back.

When Sandy saw that Ken was almost out of sight—the flash of red was visible, but that was all—he stopped. "How's this?" He pointed to a deep pool at their feet.

"Swell." Smith began to prepare his line for casting.

Casually, as if entirely by accident, Sandy allowed his line to float downstream until he was forced to pass under Smith's line and stand between him and Ken.

The minutes crawled by slowly. Sandy finally got a strike and brought in a fair-sized fish which he dropped into Smith's creel.

"One for the worms," he said. He got a look at his watch: quarter past eleven.

“Let’s try downstream a little further,” Smith said.

Sandy blocked his way. “Hold it! I think I’ve got something.” He killed two minutes before he removed his line from the water to rebait the hook. Still standing on the narrow path so that Smith couldn’t get by, he set a new worm on the hook and cast once more.

Smith seemed jittery—and edged closer to Sandy. “Let me by.”

“What’s the matter with this place?” Sandy jeered. “I got one, didn’t I?” He cast an anxious glance downstream. If the red shirt didn’t appear soon, it was going to be difficult to keep Smith from investigating.

Smith tried to edge behind Sandy—a move Sandy blocked by stepping back suddenly and whipping his line out of water. “Missed him!”

“Looks like a good place down there.” Smith pointed downstream.

Sandy ignored the suggestion. “Wonder how Ken’s making out with grandpop?”

“Let’s go see.” Smith’s voice was eager.

“No fair,” Sandy said. “We promised him we wouldn’t interfere.” He turned his head downstream and almost sighed aloud in relief; the bright color winked at them again. “He’s still at it, anyway.”

“So he is.” Smith walked back upstream about ten feet and cast. This time he was in luck and a good-sized trout took the lure and gave battle. For five minutes Smith had his hands full and could pay no attention to anything but the fish on his line. He landed it finally and dropped it unceremoniously into the basket, his eyes glancing downstream once more.

Sandy looked at his watch again. “Eleven-thirty. Ken’s got another half hour to get him.”

Smith cast again, his eyes almost riveted on the rocks which screened all but infrequent and momentary flashes of red.

Sandy sneaked another look at his watch—only five minutes had gone by, and Smith seemed more restive by the second. He eased his line out of the water and flipped it in again—over and across Smith’s. He waited until the lines were caught and then yanked his pole hard. The wet lines snarled. Smith’s head snapped around to face the stream when he felt the tug. His eyes narrowed nastily. “Look what you’ve done!”

Sandy controlled an impulse to throw the man into the stream. He made his voice contrite. “Sorry.”

They knelt and began to unscramble the loops. Another five minutes crawled by before the lines were free again.

“Let’s go down, now.” Smith began to gather up his gear. “It’ll take us ten minutes to get there.”

“Sure.” Sandy knew he couldn’t be too obvious in his objections, but

he knew, too, that if they walked fifty feet downstream Smith could recognize the substitution. His watch said eleven-forty.

He bent down to pick up the can of worms, and managed to knock it over and spill the contents. He effectively blocked the path as he fumbled around, but his watch said only eleven forty-three when he stood up and allowed an impatient Smith to crowd past him.

Sandy looked at the water alongside—it looked cold. He looked at Smith, already five feet ahead and moving as fast as possible over the precarious footing.

Sandy shrugged and closed the space between them until he was almost on Smith's heels. Then he shouted "Look out!" and allowed himself to fall on the man ahead. His two hundred pounds landed obliquely—and heavily, and after tottering undecidedly for an instant, they both fell into the water.

Sandy was up first—he'd been on top when they landed—and, floundering around on the slippery rocks, succeeded in dislodging Smith's groping fingers several times. He crawled out finally and extended a helping hand.

Smith was already standing, the creel spouting water like a sprinkler. His face was almost apoplectic, his jaws were working furiously. "You clumsy fool!" He ignored Sandy's outstretched hand and drew back his arm as if to launch a blow.

"Geel!" Sandy said, trying hard not to grin. "I'm always doing things like that." He reached down, grabbed Smith by the slack of his shirt, and pulled him out of the water onto the rocks.

Whatever idea Smith had of starting a fight apparently vanished at this display of power. He tried to regain his control while Sandy fussed around him, emptying the creel, picking up the expensive rod, and generally acting as if he were trying to make amends.

When he finally stood back he'd managed to kill ten minutes. Ken must surely be back by this time.

He felt even better a moment later when he heard a shout. Ken was coming toward them, holding up the biggest trout Sandy had ever seen outside of an aquarium.

"Got him!" Ken yelled. Then he saw how wet they were. "What happened to you?"

Sandy tried to sound disgusted with himself. "You know me. I slipped and knocked us both in the water."

Ken didn't need a picture to tell him what had occurred. He grinned at Sandy. "Catch any fish, or did you spend all your time swimming?"

"We got two," Sandy said. "But not like that one. You trying to steal Tommy's reputation?"

Ken winked over Smith's head. "I've already stolen it."

"It certainly is a remarkable catch." Smith didn't sound so angry any

more. He even tried to make up with Sandy as they climbed up to the car. "Sorry, son," he said. "I guess I lost my temper back there."

"You certainly had reason to," Sandy said, and Ken laughed out loud.

But in their room, as they looked at the old newspaper Ken had borrowed from Mrs. Buck, their laughter died away. The panoramic picture was there, but it didn't disclose anything. The tunnels showed up, and the old tracks, and the creek, but of the Elephant Rock and the Needle there wasn't a sign.

CHAPTER XV

COUNTERPLOT

"There's something wrong about this picture." Ken let the page drop on the table. "I don't get it."

"You and me both," Sandy agreed disgustedly. "It looks as if we've been breaking our necks for absolutely nothing."

Ken made three turns around the room before he answered. "But why did they take all that trouble to keep it away from us?"

Sandy shrugged. "Don't forget that's *our* interpretation of what happened. We may be entirely wrong."

"We may be, but I doubt it." Ken sat down and cupped his chin in his hand as he stared at the picture moodily. "We'll get better proof of that if Raymond does what I expect him to do—make some excuse for getting us away from here long enough to miss Mrs. Buck this afternoon."

"And there's one other thing," Sandy said. "We think we're pretty smart. Maybe we're too smart."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever hear of a red herring? Suppose Raymond rigged this missing picture stunt just to keep us occupied—to keep us from getting too interested in something else?"

"Like what, for instance?" Ken looked up from the fuzzy newspaper reproduction.

"Who knows? It could be a lot of things."

"That's what I call a really important contribution." Ken grew serious again. "You may be right, at that. But I'd hate to have to tell the Wilsons anything about it."

"It'd be like pouring cold water over them after we finally got Mr. Wilson aroused. And there's something else, too." Sandy began to pace up and down. "Now that he and Bowleg are convinced that there was something crooked about that lawsuit, they're not going to sit quietly for very long. If they find out that there is nothing in this picture to help ..." Sandy shrugged and held up his right hand as if holding a gun in it. "Bang, bang, bang."

Ken's fist struck the table. "There has to be something here we're not seeing! I've looked at this thing until I'm bleary-eyed, but ..."

The clanging of the dinner bell interrupted him.

"Aw, let's eat," he said.

Bowleg made a valiant effort to control his curiosity during the meal, but it was evident that he wanted to know what Ken had discovered in the Buck attic. The boys were thankful that there was no opportunity for private conversation.

When the phone rang, Ken made himself sit back and wait while Ma went to answer it.

"It's for you, Ken." Ma reported. "Raymond."

When Ken returned to the table he looked as if he had accomplished a great deal. He winked over Smith's head at Bowleg, and to Sandy he said, "Mr. Raymond's found some old newspaper pictures he thought we ought to look at—and maybe photograph."

"Good." Sandy echoed Ken's heartiness. "When can we see them?"

"That's the only trouble," Ken said. "He won't be free himself before two-thirty, and that leaves us only an hour before our date with Mrs. Buck."

"Well—it's better than nothing. He'll probably let us come back if we don't get through them today."

In their room after dinner, with half an hour to kill, they sat and stared at the panoramic view again. There was no doubt that there was nothing in it that seemed of use.

"But there *must* be," Ken said for the tenth time. "That telephone call proves it. They don't want us to see this."

"But why?" Sandy tinkered with the camera aimlessly.

"I keep thinking Bowleg is going to walk in and ask what we found out," Ken said.

"I don't think he will. That telephone call convinced him that we're on the right track. I wish it convinced me. And I wonder what pictures Raymond's going to show us."

Ken handed the picture to Sandy. "Just to make sure, photograph this thing. Then if something should happen to it, we'd have a copy."

"There's one possibility, of course, that we've overlooked," Sandy muttered as he set up the camera.

"What's that?" Ken's head snapped up.

"Maybe there was more on the original photograph than the reproduction shows. You know, sometimes they cut part of a picture off before they make an engraving for printing."

The hope that flared in Ken's face died out slowly. "That doesn't make much sense, Sandy. They tried to keep us from finding this reproduction. So whatever it is that we need, it shows here." He looked out of the window. "I wonder where Smith is?"

“Why?”

“I’d like to call Mrs. Buck again and ask her if she knows where the original photograph is.”

“Thought you said it wouldn’t help.” Sandy joined him at the window.

“Probably won’t, but we can’t take a chance.”

“There he is.” Sandy pointed. “Talking to Bowleg down by the barn.”

“Good. Keep an eye on him and warn me if he comes in.”

Smith stayed out of the house for the five minutes it took Ken to complete his call.

“We’re in luck, for a change,” he said. “Mrs. Buck thinks her son has the picture with a lot of others he took from the attic a year ago. He’s getting ready to give them to a museum.”

“We can see them tomorrow in Denver, huh?” Sandy left his lookout post at the window.

“I have the address written down.” Ken looked at his watch. “Well, let’s go and see what Raymond has up his sleeve.”

The big station wagon was parked in front of the ranch house when they got there, and Madden was on the front porch talking to his employer.

“Hello,” Raymond called to them as they walked toward the house.

Madden grunted a greeting around the bag of tobacco gripped between his teeth. He was rolling a cigarette as they mounted the two steps. “I’ll be going,” he said. “I’ll take care of it.”

The station wagon purred off and Raymond led the way inside. “Just got back,” he said. “Wish I could have made it a little earlier, to give you more time.” He looked at the clock on the mantel. “Still got forty minutes.”

He went to his desk and picked up an envelope. “Figured you could use some old pictures in your story, so I scouted around and found some.” He laid the envelope on the table. “There wasn’t any in that other stuff I gave you.”

Ken moved toward the table, throwing Sandy a puzzled look as he did so. Raymond didn’t seem to be trying to delay them at all. Ken unfolded a creased newspaper page and bent over the table to look at the pictures. He and Sandy exchanged a look. It was like the page that had been partially destroyed in the files; the picture at the bottom was the same one they’d received from Mrs. Buck—the one that didn’t tell them anything new. And now, as if to prove they’d been wrong, Raymond was offering it to them.

“What do you think of it?” Raymond’s gesture took in the entire page of pictures.

Ken made himself smile. “Swell! The newspaper files have that same

page, but the bottom got torn off.” He pointed to the picture of the tunnels and the railroad. “That one was missing.”

Sandy shrugged the camera off his shoulder. “Mind if we copy it?”

“Not at all. You can take it with you if you want to.”

“It’ll only take a minute,” Sandy said. “We still have time.”

“We can do a better job of copying it back at the inn, Sandy.”

“But ...” Sandy was stopped by Ken’s look.

“If you’re sure you don’t mind.” Ken spoke to Raymond.

The big man smiled pleasantly. “Of course not. I know you’ll take care of it.”

“Well ...” Sandy slipped the page back into the envelope, being careful to fold it so as not to crease the picture at the bottom. There didn’t seem to be anything more to say. The clock hadn’t moved ahead ten minutes since they’d entered the house.

“Did you ever speak to Wilson about my offer?” Raymond asked as they moved toward the door.

“Sort of,” Ken said truthfully. “But he didn’t say much about it one way or the other.”

Raymond shrugged. “If you see him again, you can tell him I’ll give him twice per acre what I paid for this ranch. Land values have gone up since then, you know.”

Raymond stood on the porch as they left.

“Maybe you ought to kick me,” Sandy muttered out of the side of his mouth. “I seem to be dreaming.”

“I don’t like it. I feel as if someone were going to shoot us or something.”

“That’s a pleasant thought.” Sandy climbed in behind the wheel. “Maybe they fixed the motor while we were in there.” He turned the key and stepped on the starter. The motor sprang into life. “Wrong again.” He put the car into low speed and let the clutch out. There was a peculiar lurching movement. Sandy stepped down on the brake. “Flat tire.”

Raymond was moving across the lawn toward them as they got out.

“That won’t stop us,” Ken said quietly. “It only takes five minutes to put a spare on.”

“What’s wrong?” Raymond had reached the car.

“Must have picked up a nail.” Ken kicked the left rear tire. “All the way down.”

“Got a spare?”

“Sure.” Sandy took the keys out of the ignition switch and went around to the back of the car to open the deck. “Hey,” he said a moment later. “We don’t have a jack.”

Ken and Raymond joined him to look into the tool compartment.

“When did you use it last?” Raymond asked.

"We never used it," Sandy replied.

"Maybe you never had one," Raymond said.

Sandy opened his mouth to deny this statement but stopped at Ken's warning shake of the head. "Could be."

"Do you have one around, Mr. Raymond?" Ken asked.

"There's one in the station wagon, but that's not here." Raymond thought a moment. "Maybe there's another in the garage. I'll take a look."

"We did so have a jack." There was a vehemence in Sandy's voice. "I know—I checked when they delivered the car."

"Sure, sure." Ken quieted him. "I know that. Let's play this out." He grinned complacently. "Raymond won't have one in the garage, don't worry."

"Oh, no?" Sandy was grinning now. "Take a look behind you."

Raymond was hurrying toward them, carrying an old jack in his hand. "Found this one—it's old, but I think it'll work."

"Better let me do it," he added. "This thing is tricky, if I remember right." Oblivious of his fine whipcord trousers, he knelt down and began to work the jack into place.

"Let me help," Sandy said.

"I think I've got it." Raymond reappeared, puffing from the strain of bending his huge frame double, and began to work the lever up and down. The car rose slowly.

Ken looked at his watch. It was only three o'clock. At this rate they'd be in plenty of time.

The wheel was free of the ground and Raymond stopped pumping the jack handle. "Good enough." He leaned on the car. "You get the wheel off. I'm winded."

"Sure." Ken reached inside for a screw driver to pry off the hubcap and a wrench to remove the nuts. It didn't take five minutes to remove the wheel.

"I'll get the spare," Sandy said. He took the wrench and began to remove the lug that fastened the extra wheel in the luggage compartment. Raymond moved over to give him room to work, and then it happened. The car lurched under the man's weight and began to rock.

"Look out!" Ken called. "It's slipping!"

Raymond and Sandy leaped away from the car as it fell off the jack. There was an instant of silence before Raymond spoke. "I did that—I leaned too heavily." He shook his head. "I should have known better than to trust that jack."

Ken was on his knees, peering beneath the fender. "No damage."

"We'll have to get a regular garage jack to get it up now." Raymond was apologetic. "I'll go call Alec and get him to come right out," He

walked briskly toward the house.

“He finally managed it, didn’t he?” Sandy said quietly. “The car is really down, now.”

“Rut things are picking up. Did you get a good look at that picture?”

“Yes. So what?”

“Did you notice that where the page was folded there was a small triangular piece torn out?”

Sandy nodded. “At the top of the panoramic view. But I can’t see that it makes any difference to us.”

“Maybe not,” Ken admitted. “But the tear looks a little too neat to have been accidental, and I’m wondering if our clue is in that missing piece. Maybe that’s the only part of the picture they don’t want us to see. That’s why I want to take it with us—to compare it with the untorn page I got from Mrs. Buck.”

“Oh.” Comprehension dawned on Sandy’s face.

“Here comes Raymond,” Ken said. “Look upset when he tells us Alec can’t make it for a little while.”

“If he does,” Sandy answered.

He did.

CHAPTER XVI

A PLAN MISFIRES

The minutes went by. At three-thirty Raymond went inside again to hurry Alec along—or so he said. At quarter to four, Ken said he'd better call Mrs. Buck and tell her they were delayed. Raymond stayed outside with Sandy—which was fortunate, for Ken had no intention of calling anybody just then.

At four Alec turned up in his jeep-wrecker. He backed up to the convertible and got out to attach the hoist cable to the rear bumper.

"Sorry I'm a little late, but you said there was no hurry."

Raymond flushed. "You must have misunderstood me. I said I hoped you would hurry."

"Oh." Alec stopped winding the hoist handle. "That's funny. I ..."

Ken broke in abruptly. "That's an easy mistake to make. And anyway, we can see Mrs. Buck when she gets back from Denver in a couple of days."

Sandy echoed Ken's sentiments. "And we got a good picture by coming up here."

It didn't take fifteen minutes to get the spare wheel on. Alec dumped the flat into his jeep, saying he'd get it fixed up right away. When the boys tried to pay him for his work, Raymond objected firmly.

"Put it on my bill, Alec," he ordered. "It's my fault the car slipped off the jack."

"But we didn't even have a jack," Ken objected.

"It's all taken care of." Raymond waved argument aside.

Ken swung off the highway and headed back to the inn. "We'll pick the tire up later. Right now, I want to check the picture Raymond gave us with the one from Mrs. Buck."

"And we'd better find something," Sandy added.

But they didn't. They laid the two pictures side by side. The one they'd received from Raymond had obviously come from the same issue of the newspaper Ken had found in Mrs. Buck's attic, and the only difference was the small piece torn out. But when they checked

Mrs. Buck's print to see what had been torn off, they were right back where they started. All that was missing was a small section of the creek.

"Why don't you think of something?" Ken was exasperated. "You're the photographer of this combine."

"But I'm no crystal-gazer," Sandy retorted.

"Why did they delay our visit to Mrs. Buck? And why did Raymond finally give us this torn picture?" Ken shook his head angrily. "If we knew the answers to one of those questions, we'd have it."

"No doubt," Sandy said sarcastically.

"Let's do this thing logically," Ken persisted. "They didn't want us to see this untorn picture. So therefore it must contain something they don't want us to notice."

"Maybe it contains *nothing* they don't want us to notice. Joke, get it?"

"Wait a minute." Ken stopped walking around. "Say that again."

"It wasn't that good."

Ken repeated it himself. "It contains *nothing* they don't want us to notice." He strode to the table to look once more at Raymond's picture. "Maybe you've got something!"

"I sure have. A bad sense of humor."

Ken ignored that. "Look, Sandy. We've been ruining our eyes looking for *something* in these pictures. Maybe there's *nothing* there—you know: something missing."

"You mean there's something present today that was not present when those pictures were taken?"

"Yes. Why not?" Ken waited for Sandy's opinion. "We can go down and check, can't we?"

"I think so. We'll need Mrs. Buck's picture and the camera."

Ken was walking toward the door. "I've got the picture, but why the camera?"

Sandy followed Ken outside. "If you'd listened better when I tried to explain about lenses back home, you wouldn't have to ask such dumb questions now. We're going to use the view finder—and don't ask me how. You'll see."

They stopped before they reached the first tunnel on the Narrow Gauge Road, and Sandy got out to squint through the view finder. He shook his head. "Not yet. Go a little farther—up to the high point ahead."

Ken moved the car forward another three hundred feet and Sandy got out again. He looked first at the picture and then through the camera. "This is pretty near it, I'd say." He set up the tripod and fastened the camera in place.

"How do you know?" Ken got out of the car.

“Elementary, my dear Watson.” He pointed to the picture. “This is a panoramic view that shows the tunnels. Notice you can see *over* them. That means the camera must have been higher than the tunnels.” He looked around. “This is about the only spot that fills the bill. See, the mouth of the first tunnel is almost in the center of the picture.”

Ken put his eye to the finder. Then he looked at the picture. “Your camera takes in the Needle and Elephant Rock; the picture doesn’t. We’re standing in the wrong place.”

“Could be,” Sandy admitted. “But I think not. The first tunnel is in the center—just where it is in that picture—and by taking as a second marker the third tunnel in the upper left corner, the way it is in the newspaper print, I figure the camera’s just about where that other photographer put his.”

Ken took another look and nodded. “Then the original picture took in a lot more than was reproduced —just as you suspected. The newspaper cut the picture down.”

“And if we can find the *original* picture,” Sandy went on, “it should show us the Needle and Elephant Rock. But, right now, we’re looking for that *nothing* in the newspaper picture. And I don’t see it.”

Ken tried. “Looks pretty much the same to me,” he admitted dejectedly. “Of course, the tracks are gone, and there are stones scattered around on the road and in the tunnels, but that’s all I notice.”

“Let’s concentrate on the top of the picture,” Sandy suggested, “where it’s been torn.”

“It’s a part of the creek that’s torn out,” Ken said. “Let me look through the finder again.” When he stepped back he shook his head. “All I can see that’s been changed is that there is a big rock sitting in the water now. It’s just about where the page is torn.”

Sandy checked Ken’s findings. “You mean that boulder in the creek up beyond the fence?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a big baby, isn’t it?” Sandy straightened up and sighed. “But it probably doesn’t mean a thing.” He checked the light and took a shot of the view. “Just to compare with the original—if we get it.”

A horn blast startled them. Smith’s car pulled up behind theirs and he got out carrying with him his fishing equipment. “Thought I’d take another crack at it before supper.” He stopped behind the camera, “What are you doing?”

Ken flashed a quick glance at Sandy before he answered—a glance that was a warning. Already he had unobtrusively folded the picture and slipped it into his pocket. “Mr. Raymond gave us an old view of the territory around here. We’re taking a new picture to see if anything’s changed.”

Smith laughed. "Too complicated for me. Did you find anything interesting?"

Ken shook his head. "Tracks are gone, of course, but nothing else seems different—nothing important, anyway."

Sandy broke in suddenly. "Of course, we're not sure yet. The picture was torn in one corner. We don't know if anything is missing now from that spot."

"Sandy!" Ken cut in. "We'd better get ..."

"What could be missing?" Smith asked, the levity disappearing from his manner.

Sandy shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe we'll learn when we get to look through Mrs. Buck's collection in a couple of days."

"We have to get back." Ken bent down to unfasten the camera from the tripod. "And Mr. Smith wants to do some fishing before dark." He forced a laugh. "If you let Sandy get started, he'll talk to you for hours about photography."

Ken waited until Smith's car had entered the tunnel before he turned to Sandy. "Wasn't that bright! Why don't you tell him everything we know?"

Sandy was grinning broadly. "Might be a good idea, at that."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Relax, son," Sandy soothed. "And listen a minute. We have no evidence yet—nothing tangible."

"You don't have to remind me of that. But your performance isn't ..."

"No? What do you suppose our friend will do now that he's sure we intend to go through Mrs. Buck's collection looking for this picture?"

"That's what I'm driving at!" Ken exploded. "If we'd have let him think we're satisfied, he wouldn't do anything. Now, he'll probably take the first opportunity to break into Mrs. Buck's house to make sure we don't find anything." Ken's jaw dropped as he got what Sandy had been driving at.

"Came the dawn." Sandy grinned. "Evidence is evidence, isn't it? If we can get a picture of Smith, Raymond, or Madden breaking into Mrs. Buck's house, it'll be something to start with. Face them with a jail sentence for burglary and maybe they'll do a little talking."

"Oh, brother!" Ken salaamed low. "Master—your humble servant is a dope."

"Rise, slave, and away to the plotting room to perfect our dastardly plan." Sandy walked pompously toward the car. "And bring that paraphernalia."

The plan was very simple; it consisted of making sure that Smith knew they were going to the movies after supper, and of stuffing some photographic equipment into the capacious pockets of their

windbreakers. Sandy removed the film from the camera and inserted a fresh roll of infrared. He rummaged through the suitcase until he found an infrared flash bulb. They got into their car in plenty of time to make the seven o'clock show.

"You sure that bulb won't give us away?" Ken asked as they waited for the tiny box office to open.

"It's black," Sandy said. "The light it gives is invisible to the eye."

"Maybe we should have told Bowleg what we're doing," Ken said.

"And explain to him that we're doing it because the pictures haven't shown us anything?" Sandy shook his head. "He'd start a full-scale war."

They took seats on the aisle in the last row. The house lights went out and the show started with a cartoon. That was followed by a newsreel, which was followed by five minutes of coming attractions.

Ken looked at his watch after the feature had been running some time. "Should we get out now?"

"It won't be good and dark for another half hour. And they won't try anything until then."

At half past eight they slipped out of their seats. It was dark outside, and they were out of reach of the lights from the theater before they had gone twenty feet. Safe in a shadowy store entrance they stopped to look around. There were lights in the drugstore and in the newspaper office, but those were too far away to be a threat to their concealment. Several people were out in the street, but there was no one within a hundred feet of them.

"Come on." Ken walked toward the Narrow Gauge Road. "Mrs. Buck's is the fourth house up."

The building was dark, as they had expected. The next house was only a hundred feet away, but its three lighted windows did nothing to dispel the shadows.

They looked around once more, and then ducked into the open space between the two houses and made their way toward the rear.

"There's a row of bushes about twenty feet from the back porch," Ken said. "They'll give us cover."

They swung around in a wide circle and approached the bushes from behind, stopping when they reached them.

"How far are we from the back door?" Sandy whispered as they huddled on the ground.

"The porch is about six feet wide," Ken answered. "Add that to the twenty feet between us and the porch."

Sandy opened his windbreaker and used it as a cover under which he set the focus and exposure of the camera by the light of a tiny flashlight. Then he assembled the flash gun.

"I'm all set. The minute we hear suspicious noises at the back door

I'll shoot."

By nine-fifteen they were so cramped that they could hardly move. And it was so quiet that they could hear occasional snatches of music from the theater. Several cars drove down the street and twice people walked by, but no one seemed even remotely interested in the Buck house.

And then, just as Ken was about to say it was nine-thirty, he clutched Sandy's arm hard. He put his lips against Sandy's ear and whispered. "Footsteps?"

They both heard it this time—the almost unnotice-able swish of feet through grass. The noise stopped, and then started only to stop again.

Sandy nudged Ken. "One or two?" The words were barely spoken.

They waited until the sounds started again, clearer this time.

"I can't tell," Ken breathed.

Again they strained their ears as the sounds came closer. Whoever it was, he was swinging wide of the house almost in the path the boys had taken. For a moment it looked as if the boys might be caught from the rear, but when, after a pause, the sounds commenced once more, it was apparent that they were approaching the back porch directly from the side of the house.

The swishy sounds changed to crunching as the unknown's feet left the grass and trod on cinders. Then came the soft creak of wood. All sounds stopped after that for almost a minute. Then the creaking came again to be followed by soft treads across the boards of the porch.

Sandy rose to his knees and then to his feet. It was so black that he couldn't be sure he was centering the back door in the lens, but he aimed the camera in the general direction and waited.

From the porch came the faint sound of metal on metal, and then a louder squeak of groaning wood. The camera shutter clicked faintly.

Ken had begun to rise when he heard a sound behind them. Before he could turn, there was another noise directly over him—a dull sort of sound—and he felt Sandy slump. Ken tried to twist sideways, but it was too late. He felt the blow on the back of his head, and then his knees buckled under him.

CHAPTER XVII

ONE GETS AWAY

Everything was going around and around in big, slow circles, and when Ken began to make out what the crazy objects were, they switched and went around the other way. He was under water, he thought. It was wet and cold, and he couldn't breathe. And there was a fish with big eyes looking right at him—Ken was in a fish bowl and the fish was outside looking in. He thought it was very funny and began to giggle. The fish swung its tail and slapped his face—hard.

The giggle changed into a gurgle and Ken opened his eyes. There was a fish staring at him—only a foot away. No, it wasn't a fish, it was ... Ken groaned and tried to focus.

"Good," a voice said. "You're coming around."

Ken tried to sit up, but he couldn't make it until an arm was passed around his shoulders to help. Bowleg was beside him, holding a pot of water in his free hand.

"No more water," Ken gasped. He shook his head and the pain made him dizzy. "Where's Sandy?"

Bowleg jerked his head sideways. "Tommy's taking care of him."

Ken forced his head around to look. There wasn't much light, but he could see Tommy helping Sandy to sit up.

Bowleg withdrew his arm, "All right?"

Ken nodded slowly—any movement of his head started the pain going again. "What happened?" He looked around. "Where are we?"

"Up in the attic of Mrs. Buck's house," Bowleg answered.

"How'd we get here?" The ache in his head was still pounding, but Ken was beginning to think once more.

"That's a good question," Bowleg said dryly. "I thought maybe you could answer that."

"Oh!" The groan came from Sandy. "I feel as if Elephant Rock fell on me."

"If Tommy hadn't seen you two," Bowleg went on, "the rock might just as well have hit you. You'd have been a couple of cooked geese." He laughed. "Cooked is the right word, too."

Sandy staggered to his feet and reeled for a moment before he could steady himself. He caught sight of the camera on the floor and bent down gingerly to pick it up and look it over. "It's open and the film must be fogged," he said, "but it doesn't look damaged." He sat down on a pile of newspapers. "What goes on?"

Ken sniffed. "What smells in here?"

Bowleg stepped out of the way to disclose a kerosene lantern on its side, surrounded by a pool of oil.

"We didn't ..."

"Hold it, son," Bowleg said. "Let's take this from the beginning. What were you doing here?"

"We weren't here," Ken answered. "We were outside behind the bushes."

"Why?"

The boys looked at each other helplessly, and then Ken, realizing that they couldn't keep it a secret any longer, told Bowleg of their disappointment with the pictures and their attempt to get some other evidence that could be used as a lever to pry the true story out of Raymond. When he stopped, he looked at Bowleg apprehensively, waiting for the explosion he was sure would follow.

But the little Westerner didn't blow up; he looked at them almost sheepishly. "Don't blame you for figuring that way. Chet and I acted like a couple of kids, I guess. But we're not crazy enough to go out gunning for them." His face hardened. "I don't know, though, after this."

Sandy broke in hastily. "What happened after we got slugged?" He turned to Ken. "And how did we get slugged, anyway? I thought we did a good job of sneaking around."

"Don't know, exactly." Ken rubbed the back of his head and winced when his hand came into contact with a good-sized swelling. "I guess there were two of them—I heard something behind us just after you took the picture, but I wasn't fast enough to do anything about it."

"They must have been watching the place," Sandy said. "And we thought we were so smart."

Ken turned to Bowleg. "But how did you get up here?"

"It was Tommy, mostly."

The youngster had been standing there quietly. Now he spoke up. "I was across the street from the movie house when you two came out. I saw you walk up the street and disappear."

"Did you follow us?" Ken asked.

"I was going to," Tommy admitted, "but I figured I'd better tell Bowleg first. I called the inn from the drugstore, and he said he'd be right over."

Bowleg took it up. "I thought you two would be safe enough if you

were in the movies.” He shook his head. “Should have known better.”

Tommy went on. “While I was waiting for Bowleg, I walked up the street to see if I could find out where you went. Then a car came up with two men in it. One got out and the other drove away.”

“See who they were?” Ken asked quickly.

Tommy shook his head. “It was too dark and I was too far away. I just stood there and then I saw another man come out from some place and talk to the man who got out of the car. Then they crossed the street and I couldn’t see them any more.”

“I was late getting here,” Bowleg said. “I looked around for Smith at the inn, but he was gone—his car too. It was a little after nine when I got to town. Tommy told me what he’d seen, so we waited around to find out what would happen.”

“We knew you couldn’t have gone far,” Tommy explained, “because your car was still parked in front of the movie house.”

“Were you watching this house?” Ken asked. “Because if you were you must have seen the men come out again.”

“No.” Bowleg sounded disgusted with himself. “It wasn’t until nearly ten that I suddenly remembered. You see, I didn’t figure the Buck collection had any importance, because I knew you’d looked at it already. Then, when I thought of it, we walked up here and saw a flickering light coming out of the attic window. I knew nobody was supposed to be home, so we went around to investigate and found the back door open.”

“We came up here,” Tommy continued, “and found you two unconscious and this thing rigged up.” He pointed to the candle and the overturned lantern in its pool of kerosene.

“I don’t get it.” Ken looked from the candle to the lantern and back again. “What’s it supposed to be?”

“It’s not quite the way we found it,” Bowleg explained. He bent down and picked a piece of string off the floor. “Smell it.”

The boys sniffed at the string. “It’s soaked in kerosene,” Ken said.

Bowleg held it up to show a loop tied in one end. “This was fastened to the candle—the other end was in that pool of oil. When the candle burned down enough, the string would catch fire, act like a fuse, and start the kerosene burning.” He rapped on the wooden beam over his head. “Nice old, dry wood. Go up like paper—with you in it.” He smiled as if the thought amused him. “That’s what I said—cooked goose.”

“They’d never have gotten away with it—there’d be too much of an investigation,” Ken said. “Raymond’s smart enough to know that.”

“Why wouldn’t they get away with it?” Bowleg broke in.

“Everybody at the inn knew you had an appointment with Mrs. Buck that you couldn’t keep.” He grinned at them and in the flickering light

he looked like an imp. "You have a reputation for sticking your noses in other people's business, so wouldn't it be easy to believe that you couldn't wait until she got back—that you sneaked into the house and that your lantern turned over and set the house afire?" He shrugged. "You two just got caught in the blaze. Accidental death, the sheriff would say."

"But Mrs. Buck knows we already saw these newspapers," Ken protested. "Why should we come back here again?"

Bowleg waved this away. "You forgot something."

"What about the bumps on our heads?" Sandy felt his gingerly. "That would be evidence of foul play."

"By the time anybody looked at you two," Bowleg said, "there wouldn't be enough evidence to know *who* you were, let alone how you were banged up."

Ken shivered. "When did you say you got here?"

"About ten o'clock," Bowleg repeated. "The string was almost in the fire by then."

"They must have carried us up here after they knocked us out, and then set this little trap." Ken glanced down at his watch and saw that it was not quite half past ten. "We'd better get out of here. They'll be coming back to see what happened."

"Let them." Bowleg flipped back his jacket to show a gun.

They set the lantern upright and mopped up the kerosene with some old rags they found. Ken checked over the newspaper bundles quickly. "They were so sure of themselves they didn't even bother going through these."

Bowleg led the way down, his gun drawn and ready. They tiptoed through the empty house to the back where he looked out briefly before he let them follow him into the still night.

"Can you get home all right, Tommy?" Bowleg stopped them at the street to ask.

"Sure."

"O.K." He turned to Ken. "Ill lead, you follow in your car. I think we might ask Smith a few questions."

"That," said Sandy, "is a pleasure I've been promising myself for a couple of days."

But that pleasure was denied them. Ma was asleep when they got back to the inn, but on the kitchen table there was a note from Smith saying he'd been suddenly called away. Sandy went out to see if his car was still in the shed, while Ken and Bowleg looked through Smith's room. He was gone, all right. The telephone tap was disconnected, and his personal belongings had been removed from the closet and the bureau drawers. And Sandy reported that the car was not in the shed.

"Now what?" Bowleg leaned against the kitchen table and rolled a cigarette.

"I don't know," Ken said. "Maybe I'm crazy, but I still think the answer lies in those pictures—or in the original which we may get tomorrow in Denver."

"And if you don't find anything there?" Bowleg lighted the cigarette and let smoke drift out through his nostrils.

"We'll see. My father's coming tomorrow—he'll think of something." Ken hoped he sounded more sure than he felt. "We have a lot of work to do in town. We have to get the police to check Riegel's and Raymond's signatures; we have to see Mrs. Buck's son to get that original photograph, and—"

"That's for tomorrow," Sandy interrupted. "I'm going to develop that picture we took today and then get to bed. If I don't, I think my head'll come right off."

Bowleg assented. "O.K. We won't say anything to Chet about this until you get back from Denver." He moved away from the table. "Let's get going." The little man sounded calm enough, but he wasn't fooling either of them. He'd keep hold of himself for another twenty-four hours, but after that, if they didn't come up with some conclusive evidence ...

CHAPTER XVIII

THINGS GET ROUGH

With Bowleg and his ancient car close behind, the boys took off early the next morning. They stopped at the gas station to pick up their tire; there had been nothing wrong with it except that the valve had been loosened. “Worked loose,” Alec had said, and they didn’t enlighten him. They bought a new jack, too, just in case they managed to get a legitimate flat tire along the road.

Bowleg followed their car until they had gone about ten miles. Then he blew his horn. They pulled over and let him stop alongside. “I’ll leave you here,” he said. “You should be all right now. But don’t stop for anything—especially not hitchhikers.”

“Check. Remember, Bowleg, you said you wouldn’t say anything to Wilson until we get back.”

“I won’t.”

Ken waved and let out the clutch.

When they were only fifteen miles from Denver they stopped and Ken called Banner’s office. Banner wasn’t in, but Ken got the home number and tried that. A sleepy voice, gruff with irritation, answered. Banner came alive, though, the minute he identified Ken, and promised to be at the office by eleven.

Ken pulled into a parking spot almost directly in front of the building by half past ten. They locked the car and walked toward the entrance.

“I hope we didn’t forget anything,” Sandy said.

Ken pulled an envelope out of his pocket and looked inside. “The two negatives of the signatures, and the shot you took yesterday of that panoramic view.” He put a hand out to push the revolving door.

“Hold it!” Sandy pulled Ken away from the door. “Don’t turn around to look, but halfway down the block, and across the street, is Smith’s car. They must be watching us every minute—in spite of Bowleg.” He dropped Ken’s arm. “I’m going over there—that guy’s got something coming to him.”

“Wait!” Ken pulled Sandy to one side. “We’re not going anywhere

near that car until I get rid of these negatives. I'll leave them with the receptionist for Hank. Keep an eye on it, I'll be out in a minute."

It took more than a minute—it was nearer five before Ken could write a note, slip it and the negatives into an envelope addressed to Banner, and leave it with the girl at the desk. He almost ran back to the sidewalk and glanced rapidly up and down the street. There was no sign of Sandy. He swung around again. There was Smith's car—held up by a traffic light at the corner.

Ken was in their own car in a second; he wasn't even sure if Sandy was in Smith's, but there wasn't time to investigate. He jammed the gearshift lever into low and swung around in a sharp U turn, oblivious of traffic. There were four cars between his and Smith's when the light changed to green.

For the next twenty minutes Ken had to use every bit of his driving skill and every trick at his command to keep Smith's car in sight. The city was strange to him, and it was obviously completely familiar to the driver of the car ahead. Ken couldn't risk getting too close to his quarry, and that gave Smith excellent opportunities to take advantage of traffic lights and one-way streets.

Twice Ken was caught by lights and had to wait while Smith's car pulled ahead. Once the car disappeared entirely, and Ken drove like a demon until he caught sight of it once more, driving down a side street. They left the business district and the streets changed from wide thoroughfares to narrow ones blocked by trucks. He reduced the intervening space slightly, but always kept two or three vehicles between them.

They were in a region of warehouses and railroad yards now, traversing an ill-paved, winding route. They crossed several bridges and turned so many corners that Ken hadn't the slightest idea where they were. Then, up ahead, Smith's car pulled in to the curb; Ken followed suit immediately, his car hidden by three parked trailers.

Smith crossed the sidewalk and disappeared into a doorway. Right behind him came Sandy and behind Sandy was a burly individual Ken did not recognize.

Ken walked cautiously toward Smith's car which stood in front of a dingy restaurant. But there was no one inside except the man behind the counter. The decrepit building that housed the lunchroom had another entrance, and through a glass door a flight of ascending stairs was visible. Ken moved back far enough to scan the upper two stories above the restaurant, and then ducked back quickly; the man who had followed Sandy had appeared briefly at one of the second-floor windows to pull down the shade.

Ken looked up and down the street. There were truck drivers in sight, but no sign of a policeman. He considered enlisting the help of

some of the men but discarded the idea. By the time he'd convinced them of the truth of his story, Smith and his friend might have disappeared with Sandy, or even—

Swiftly Ken made up his mind. He had to go it alone. The element of surprise was on his side, and all he would have to do was to create enough of a disturbance to scare Smith off. He entered the dark, smelly hallway.

The door closed behind him, cutting off all street sounds and, with them, the feeling of safety that comes from knowing there are people within earshot. One small bulb supplied what light there was, and from above there was silence. Ken put his hand on the banister and began to climb.

Another tiny bulb made a vain effort to dispel the darkness in the upper hallway. In the dimness Ken made out two doors and, at the far end of the hall, another flight of stairs going up. He put one foot forward and froze into immobility. A voice filtered through the door near him—Sandy's voice.

"What do you suppose you're going to get out of this?" Sandy was taunting. "Except maybe ten years for kidnapping."

There was no answer, but a floor board creaked.

"Don't get any closer! Stay where you are!" It was a hoarse voice this time—Sandy's captor, evidently.

Ken could visualize the scene inside the room as clearly as if he were there too. He could see Sandy edging forward, trying to get within reach of his undoubtedly armed guard. Let Sandy get his huge hands on the gun, and the man would be lucky if he escaped with nothing more than a broken wrist. Ken began to edge toward the door, then he stopped.

Where was Smith? If he were in the room, he would have said something. And if he were in the room, Sandy couldn't have tried that maneuver. Ken changed direction and moved forward to the other door in the hall. He stopped for an instant, put his ear against the thin panel, and mentally congratulated himself for not having burst through to Sandy in the other room. He could hear voices—quiet voices, but distinguishable. One was Smith's, and the other was Raymond's.

Raymond was speaking with barely repressed anger. "You've messed things up ever since you pulled that trick at Burton's place. I told you to lay off the rough stuff."

"It looked like a good opportunity to stop that snooping."

"Well, it didn't work. And neither did that stunt with the car, nor that stupid setup last night at the old lady's place! What are you trying to do, put a rope around your neck?"

"You're in this, too." Smith's voice took on an edge.

"Those were *your* bright ideas. And now you brought him here. What for? I told you to keep an eye on them—not kidnap them."

"I want to know what they're up to. He'll tell us, all right."

"Not if they keep on the way they have; they'll beat you this time, too."

"Yeah?" Smith sounded nasty now. "Let me remind you that if you'd smashed that thing years ago, you wouldn't have to worry now."

Raymond went on the defensive. "There was no reason to—it might have aroused suspicion. We've been safe for twenty years, haven't we?"

"You'd better take care of that right away—tonight."

"Not unless we have to. It'd look even worse if we did it now."

"Well decide when we find out how much they really know," Smith said. "If they're really getting hot, I'll call you."

"How are you going to handle him?"

"Don't worry about your hide." Smith laughed. "There's no proof of any tie between you and me, and I'm going to disappear after this—I'll get in touch with you. If they can't prove the other thing—we're O.K. You'll be under suspicion, but I guess you're used to that by now."

"And if they're on to something?"

"I'll call you, and you can destroy the only real evidence they have."

Ken looked hastily for a place to hide; Raymond would appear in a moment. But there was none in the hallway. He swung around and looked up the stairs. It was dark there, and in any case it was his only chance. He took the stairs two at a time, disregarding the small noise he made. He'd just reached the top when the rattle of the doorknob sounded from below. He huddled against the wall of the landing, trying to blend with the time-darkened wallpaper as footsteps descended the lower flight. When the downstairs door closed, Ken took his first breath in almost a minute.

He peered down through the railing and saw that Raymond had left the room door open behind him, and at that instant he heard Smith's voice coming from the other room—the one in which Sandy was being held prisoner. He formed his plan quickly. Since Smith got into the other room without coming into the hall, there must be a connecting door between them. He decided to use that inner door to launch his attack. He began to creep down the stairs again, more rapidly than he had ascended them, for he knew from the tone of Smith's voice that Sandy would have to talk or else.

Suddenly the downstairs door banged open and steps hammered up the stairs. Ken leaped back out of sight and crawled up to the relative safety of the upper landing.

Impatient knuckles rapped loudly on the closed door of the prison room below. Ken couldn't see what was going on, but he heard the

door creak open and then shut sharply.

“What’s the matter?” Smith was out in the hall almost directly below Ken.

“You’re smart, all right.” Raymond ground the words out. “The other one must have followed you—their car is parked down the street.”

“So what? He’ll never find this place.”

“No? They’ve fooled you every time before, haven’t they? They’ll have the cops up here soon enough.”

“We won’t need much time to get what we want out of him,” Smith said. “You stand guard. If you see the other one coming with cops—or alone—warn us. We’ll go out the back way.”

“I’m not standing guard—I have to keep out of this if we expect to salvage anything.”

“O.K.” Smith apparently wasn’t going to waste time arguing. “Go across the street and get Ted. Tell him to come prepared for trouble, but to stay in the doorway downstairs. If he sees anything suspicious, let him come a-running.”

Raymond clattered down the steps again. Smith re-entered the room and Ken heard the door of the room close.

This time he didn’t hesitate. He slipped down the stairs and entered the front room through the open door. It took him a moment to get his bearings. The blinds were drawn and what little light there was came through a slightly open doorway. Smith’s voice came from there too.

“Let’s not waste time. What do you know about that land deal?”

“You ought to know,” Sandy answered. “You listened to everything we said.”

“Wise guy, huh?” Smith was growing nastier by the minute. “What did you come to Denver for?”

“To meet Ken’s father.”

“What did you go to the newspaper office for?”

There was silence. Ken edged forward to peer through the crack between the door panel and the frame. He caught his breath as he looked. Sandy’s guard wasn’t armed with a gun—he had a hunting knife in his hand. It was pointed directly at Sandy—the gleaming blade not ten inches from its target. Smith stood directly in front of the big redhead, his head reaching only to Sandy’s shoulders.

He repeated his last question, and when Sandy didn’t answer, he spoke again. “Maybe Bill here can convince you that we’re not fooling.”

“Sure.” The heavy arm holding the knife moved forward a couple of inches.

“Well? Going to talk?”

Ken acted. He swung the door open fast and let it slam back against

the wall with a crash. As he leaped through, he saw the knife waver as the man called Bill half turned. Ken left him for Sandy to take care of; he let his wild rush carry him to Smith, who was too surprised to do more than raise one arm. Ken brushed it aside like a straw and let his hundred and eighty pounds strike the man in a long, swooping tackle. The force of his drive carried both of them six feet across the room to the wall. The plaster had never been designed for such treatment; it crumbled under the impact, and hunks of it crashed on the floor. Ken reared back and Smith slumped down, all the breath knocked out of him. Ken picked him up by the slack of his jacket and drove a haymaker to his jaw. Smith slid to the floor—this time to stay there.

Ken swung around, but there was no need for such haste. Sandy had his jailer in a hammer lock. The man's back arched in agony. But he still held the knife.

"Drop it," Sandy said, twisting a little harder. "Drop it or I'll snap your arm."

The knife fell to the floor. Sandy kicked it away and then spun the man around like a top, his left hand coming up in a straight jab. The man dropped like a bag of sand—limply.

"Just in time." Sandy looked down at Smith. "Too bad I couldn't take him."

"They've got another man watching downstairs," Ken said. "He'll be up here if he heard this racket."

"Let him come." Sandy looked angry enough to relish the thought of another fight.

Ken didn't bother to answer. "Come on—don't fool around." He ran through the connecting door to the other room with Sandy on his heels. Out in the hall once more they paused. Downstairs the front door opened and rapid steps came up. Ken moved halfway up the next flight and made room for Sandy beside him.

"Bill—Smith—what goes on?"

They could see the newcomer at the door, a gun in his hand. He tried the knob and pushed the door open to peer in. Then he slid inside the room. It took only a moment for Ken and Sandy to slip past the partly open door and down the stairs. Not until they were out in the street and running for their car did they look back. There was no sign of anybody chasing them.

CHAPTER XIX

THE HEAD THAT MOVED

In almost a single motion Ken had the car door open and the motor roaring. The wheels were turning even before Sandy could get the door shut, and they ripped down the block like a fighter plane taking off.

They skidded around a corner as Sandy, trying to brace himself against the lurching of the car, scribbled something on a piece of paper. "Got their license number," he said, hanging on to the door as Ken took another corner. "Where are you going?"

"Looking for a policeman," Ken said. "We can press charges against them, now."

"If you can find a cop," Sandy muttered. He closed his eyes as Ken swung around a lumbering truck and back into line again just in time to miss an oncoming giant of the road. "This is the way to do it, chum. Keep it up and you'll have every traffic cop in Denver on our tail. If we live long enough, I mean."

But there wasn't a police officer in sight. When five minutes had gone by, Ken slowed up. "It's too late by now. They're not going to wait for us."

"Let's go back and take a look," Sandy suggested.

Ken made his way back to the street and drove past the restaurant. Smith's car was gone.

"Let's get to Banner." Sandy relaxed a little as Ken gave no evidence of resuming his mad pace. "We can turn in an alarm and let the authorities handle it from here on in."

"How'd you get in that mess? I thought you were going to keep an eye on Smith—not join him."

Sandy grinned. "Couldn't resist the invitation. Smith came over to me and asked me to go along—and made sure I'd respond by pointing a gun at me."

Ken started the car again. "A gun—right out in the open?"

"In his pocket. Anyway, he said he had a gun there. I didn't think it was a good idea to argue. I figured you'd be along pretty soon."

"I just about made it." Ken pulled into a parking place near the newspaper office. "Found out something, though."

Banner was at his desk, speaking on the telephone when they entered his office. He swung around, saw them, and waved. He said into the instrument, "They just came in. O.K. I'll tell them." He dropped the phone back into its cradle, and indicated two chairs. "That was the police. Their expert says the two handwriting samples you left here are identical—they're prepared to testify to that effect. That negative you left is in the darkroom being blown up. Should be here any minute." He got out a stick of gum and began to chew lazily. "Now, suppose you tell me what's cooking."

"First, we'll tell you what just happened," Ken said. "Then we can get the police on the job." Rapidly he sketched the events of the past hour.

Banner called the police department once more, repeated what he'd just heard and added the license number of Smith's car. "They'll call back as soon as they check the plate," he explained. Then he handed the instrument to Sandy. "Describe the men for them, so the alarm can be sent out." When Sandy was finished, Banner settled back. "What are you going to do now?"

"Nothing much," Sandy said. "With what Ken overheard Raymond say, it shouldn't be too hard to reopen the case."

Banner shook his head. "Only Ken overheard Raymond—you didn't, did you?"

"No, but ..."

"Then it's Raymond's word against Ken's, and I'll bet anything you want to name that Raymond will have witnesses to say he never left the ranch today."

"But what about Smith and the other guy—Bill? If we catch them, they'll talk to save their own skins."

"Remember, Smith said he was going to hide out—he must have a place all ready," Ken pointed out.

Sandy shook his head bewilderedly. "I don't get it. We know almost everything there is to know and we can't ..."

"We know *almost* everything," Ken repeated. "But we don't know the most important thing—how they moved the boundary line. And if we don't find out soon, Raymond will destroy the evidence just like he said."

"You mean we're no better off than we were before." Sandy's tone showed his disgust. "We still can't prove anything—until we either catch Smith or find out what they did twenty years ago."

"If you only knew what Raymond was going to 'smash,'" Banner said, "you'd have it." He looked up suddenly. "I don't suppose you could keep an eye on him?"

"How?" Ken asked. "Whatever it is, it may be on his own land and he can make sure we keep off that. There's no charge we can press against him to keep him in jail until Smith is caught. And even if we did get Raymond safely put away, how do we know one of his pals won't do the job for him—whatever it is."

A boy came in then carrying a huge enlargement of the picture Sandy had taken. Quickly Ken pulled the newspaper reproduction from his pocket—the one he had obtained from Mrs. Buck. But they pored over the two pictures for ten minutes without finding a single object that gave them any clue.

"It's no use," Ken said. "There's nothing here to help us—nothing seems to be different, except for the missing tracks and a few scattered stones."

"And that big rock in the creek," Sandy added.

"We've got one more chance." Ken took a piece of paper out of his pocket and looked at a number written there. "I'm going to call Mrs. Buck's son, to see if they have the original photograph." He got his connection and spoke briefly. When he dropped the phone, he muttered, "Mr. Buck's a teacher. Won't be home until half past three."

The telephone rang after a few minutes, breaking the reverie into which all three of them had fallen. Hank scooped it up. "Banner speaking. What! No kidding. Did you check that building? Yeah ... good. That's something, anyway." He turned back to the boys. "They found the car abandoned."

"Huh?" Ken leaned forward. "No sign of the men?"

Banner shook his head. "And the car's no good as a clue, either. It was rented ten days ago by a man who gave his name as Arthur Smith. They looked over those rooms, though, and found a lot of fingerprints, some of which belong to a character the police know—Bill King. He looks like your Bill, too. The alarm's out now to pick him up for questioning." He stood up and stretched. "Let's eat."

They picked up lunch in the newspaper cafeteria and then spent some time at police headquarters, where they identified a photograph of Bill King.

By the time they walked back to where the car was parked it was time to call on the Bucks. Banner had talked his editor into assigning him to the story, and went along. Ken rang the bell and they were admitted by Mrs. Buck herself.

"I told John what you were after," she said when she had led them into a living room. "He's upstairs now, looking through the files. He thinks he has the one you want."

Her son came down the stairs then and was introduced. He had three yellowed photographs in his hand which he spread out on the table. "I wasn't sure which of these you meant—which one Dad used

to make that newspaper cut.”

“This one.” Sandy spoke excitedly and pointed to the center one. “You can see the pencil marks where your father indicated just what part of the picture he wanted to show in the engraving.”

The photograph was in remarkably good condition in spite of its age.

“There’s the Elephant Rock and the Needle, too,” Ken said triumphantly. “The picture’s almost exactly like the one you took yesterday, Sandy.”

“Yes.” Sandy looked up. “But do you see anything we want?”

Ken looked again, more carefully and at length. His voice was more subdued when he spoke. “No, I don’t, but ...”

Sandy interrupted. “Could we borrow this print for a little while, Mr. Buck? We’d like to copy it and match it to another one.”

“How fast can your photographers work?” he asked Banner as they drove back toward the newspaper office.

“Fast as you want them to,” Banner replied. “You just give the orders, they’ll carry them out.”

They were brought a negative fifteen minutes after they reached his office. Sandy looked at it carefully. “Good. Now let me use your enlarger.” He turned to Ken. “Bring the other enlargement into the darkroom.”

He laid the big print of the picture he had taken the day before on the enlarging easel and projected the image of the new negative onto it, manipulating the enlarger until the two images coincided. Then he turned off the projector light and slipped a piece of sensitized paper in place. Five minutes later he laid the wet print on the dryer drum and two minutes after that the print fell out, finished.

“Got a light box?” Sandy asked the darkroom technician.

“In the studio.”

Ken and Banner followed to watch Sandy lay his picture on the glass top of the light box and flip the switch. The white glass sprang into brilliance and they could see right through the print. Then he laid the enlarged copy of the newspaper’s picture over the first one and moved it around until the tunnels and Needle Rock coincided.

He taped them in place and made room for Ken to look. “There’s something wrong here,” Sandy mumbled, “The first tunnel and the Needle match up all right, but the Elephant Rock in the old picture doesn’t fall right over the Elephant Rock in the new picture.” He stepped back, and his mouth fell open. “Hey! I was right! They moved the rock.”

“Let me see.” Banner shouldered Sandy aside to look.

“Wait a minute!” Ken’s voice had regained its life and snap. His face was tense as he bent low over the lighted pictures, his nose almost

touching the top one. "They didn't move it! It's not the same rock!"

"Huh?" Sandy squeezed his way between Banner and Ken.

Ken was shaking a little with excitement. "Look at that pile of rock to the right of Elephant Rock in the old picture. *It* looks a little like an elephant, too, doesn't it?"

"Sure, but what ..."

"And notice that what we call Elephant Rock in the new picture coincides with that pile."

"You mean," Sandy spluttered, "that all this trouble started because they used the wrong pile of rocks as a marker? It can't be! We looked at the markers—there's only one rock that looks anything like an elephant."

"That's because they knocked the head off the other pile of rocks—the real Elephant Rock." Ken pointed to the big boulder plainly visible in the stream bed. "That's what they didn't want us to see—that rock. It isn't in the old picture because there was no rock in the creek then—it was on top of the pile—it was the head of the elephant." He looked into Sandy's incredulous eyes. "You remember, you said it yourself—that if that other pile of rocks had a head it would look more like an elephant than Elephant Rock." He laughed out loud. "You didn't know how right you were! We've got it! It all fits—even to Burton being a blaster. It would take an expert blaster to knock just that one rock off without breaking up everything and making it too obvious."

"This is some yarn," Hank said happily.

"Hold it!" Ken stood still, all merriment gone. "That's what they're going to smash—that rock in the creek."

"Who cares?" Sandy chortled. "We've got the pictures to prove it."

"I don't know," Ken said. "I don't know how much weight our pictures would have, if the rock wasn't in existence any more to back them up."

Banner scratched his head. "I don't know, either, but it certainly would simplify matters if the rock stayed there. But didn't Raymond say he wouldn't smash it unless he had to?"

"Sure," Ken said. "But now he has to on account of these pictures."

"How does he know we have them?" Sandy asked.

"Guess you're right," Ken admitted. He looked at his watch and then reached for the phone. "It's almost five-thirty and we have to meet Dad at the airport at six. I'd better call Mr. Buck and tell him that well mail the print back to him."

When he got his number he explained that they'd been delayed and that the print would be returned by mail, and was just about to hang up when a startled look appeared on his face. "What! My father? What did he look like?" As he listened, his jaw dropped until his mouth was

wide open. He hung up, finally, and swallowed hard several times.

“What’s this about your father?” Sandy spoke impatiently, worried by Ken’s obvious distress. “How did he get to Mrs. Buck’s place?”

“He didn’t. It was Smith, judging by the description Mrs. Buck gave me. He must have been tailing us again. A few minutes after we left, he went in, said he was my father, and asked if they’d given us the picture.”

“Did she tell him?” Banner asked.

“Sure. Why not? How did she know?”

Sandy reached for the telephone. “I’m going to call the inn and have Bowleg keep an eye on that rock until we get there.”

“Good.” Ken paced back and forth impatiently. “What’s the matter?” he asked after a minute had gone by.

“They’re ringing, I guess.” Sandy jiggled the hook up and down. “Operator, will you try it again?” Another minute went by and then another. Sandy hung up. “There’s no answer.”

“That’s funny,” Ken said. “Ma’s almost always home at this time getting supper ready.” He looked at his watch again and then turned to Hank. “Keep trying, will you, please. We’ll pick up Dad and get started back.”

The plane was twenty minutes late in arriving. Twice during that time Ken called Banner, only to be told that there was still no answer from the inn. When the big four-motored transport swooped down and taxied up to the terminal building, Sandy had to hold Ken to keep him from running out onto the field.

“There he is!” Sandy pointed to the tall, slender man walking toward them, a small bag in one hand and a portable typewriter in the other.

“Hi!” Richard Holt increased his pace when he saw them. He dropped his baggage to greet them. “How’s the vacation coming?”

“We’re sure glad you got here, Dad.” Ken picked up the bag and Sandy reached for the typewriter. “We’ve got to get back to the inn as fast as we can.”

“Oh? Trouble?” Mr. Holt raised his black eyebrows inquiringly. It was typical of this globe-trotting foreign correspondent that he didn’t delay them with a lot of questions. He matched his stride to the pace Sandy was setting.

“Plenty,” Ken said. “We finally figured the thing out, but if we don’t get back fast ...”

Sandy got the car moving.

“I’ll catch Dad up on everything,” Ken said to him. “You just drive as fast as you can—there’s something wrong some place. There *must* be somebody at the inn.”

CHAPTER XX

A FLASH IN THE DARK

Sandy handled the car like a toy, swinging it this way and that as he wove through the early evening traffic of the big city. He kept his eyes straight ahead, listening with half his mind to Ken's crisp summary of all that had happened to them since they had arrived at Mesa Alta.

It took half an hour to break clear of the congestion and it was another fifteen minutes after that before Sandy could really give the powerful engine its head.

Holt didn't say a word until Ken had finished completely, and then he asked half a dozen searching questions. When Ken had answered them, the reporter lighted a cigarette and lapsed into a thoughtful silence.

"Raymond—or rather Riegel—and Madden and their buddies seem to be really tough," he said finally. "And from what you tell me of Bowleg and Wilson, they're not afraid of a little trouble, either."

"You can say that again," Sandy said. "I think Bowleg'll be disappointed if he doesn't get a chance to use that howitzer he's carrying around."

"Then how do you figure on stopping the destruction of the rock—without gunplay, I mean?"

"I don't know, exactly," Ken admitted. "I hadn't even thought of that part of it."

"We'd better think of it," his father said quietly, "or we may find ourselves writing a story about a lot of very dead characters."

Sandy leaned on the horn and blasted a lethargic road hog over to the right of the road. He bore down hard on the accelerator and passed the slow vehicle, darting back into line barely in time to miss a truck. The shadows were beginning to deepen and the light was poor and deceptive.

"Maybe we can do it with the camera." Sandy flipped on the headlights. "If we could sneak up and take a picture of them actually working on the rock, wouldn't that be pretty good evidence?"

"I should think so," Richard Holt said, after considering it a

moment. "Especially if we can see their faces clearly enough to identify the individuals."

"And what happens after we flash a bulb in their faces?" Ken asked.

"We scam—but fast. And they should be so surprised that by the time they come to, we'll be safe at the inn."

"And the knowledge that a picture was taken," Richard Holt added, "should scare them off without a fight. The police can come in then and clean up the mess."

"Sounds all right," Ken admitted. "But can you sell the idea of a peaceful solution to Bowleg?"

By eight o'clock they were thirty miles from their destination. Sandy checked their headlong rush and kept the car at a safer speed, but still they were moving fast enough to pass every vehicle they encountered. By eight-twenty they had gone another fifteen miles.

"About twenty minutes more to the inn," Sandy said. He slowed up slightly as taillights appeared ahead, blew his horn, and swerved past a slow-moving car.

"That was Raymond's station wagon!" Ken exclaimed.

"Let them catch us," Sandy said. He stepped down hard and the car leaped forward. The car behind picked up speed and was soon following at a distance of a hundred feet.

Sandy sent the speedometer up to seventy for a short stretch, and the car behind stayed with him.

"Wonder what he's up to now?" he said. The car lifted its nose for a long climb.

"This is the last long hill," Ken mumbled. "It's a couple of miles to the top and then a couple more to the bottom and then we level out for the last six or seven. We can lose him on that home stretch."

They reached the crest and the headlights shot off into space until the car pointed downward again. The car jerked forward. The speedometer needle leaped to eighty and then eighty-five. The station wagon dropped rapidly behind.

"That did it," Sandy grunted.

The headlights in back of them blinked on and off—on and off.

They were halfway down the hill, still doing about eighty miles an hour, when the probing headlight beams picked up the sign warning of a crossroad ahead.

"Nobody ever uses that little lane." But even as Sandy spoke he slammed his hand down on the horn button; the loud blast split the night.

A thousand feet ahead a huge truck was backing out of the lane into the highway. It moved slowly, hesitantly.

Sandy jabbed the horn again, but the truck kept coming. "The fools!" he mumbled, and worked the brake pedal gently to check their

speed. The speedometer needle retreated sixty ... fifty ...

The truck was halfway across the highway by then, its slow backward movement continuing. And then the headlights picked up a face in the cab—a face looking out at them.

Ken gasped. “It’s that man—Bill King! It’s a trap!”

They were less than fifty feet away and traveling at thirty miles an hour. Sandy grunted and jammed the accelerator to the floor, aiming the car at the ten feet of highway still left between the back of the truck and the ditch on the left side of the road. The ten feet became nine and then eight and the distance between the vehicles dwindled to thirty feet, twenty feet, ten feet. Sandy’s left wheels hit the gravel shoulder and kissed the edge of the ditch. The rear end slewed around, the churning wheels fighting for a hold. Ken shrunk away from the side of the car as they skinned past the bulking end of the truck. There wasn’t half an inch to spare—but they made it.

Sandy fought the wheel and brought the car back on the pavement, his foot still down to the floor. He kept it there until he slowed down to skid off the highway onto their street. A minute later they rushed into the kitchen of the inn.

Ma and Bowleg, calmly finishing their supper at the big kitchen table, looked up.

“Why, Mr. Holt,” Ma said.

“Didn’t you get our telephone message?” Ken almost shouted.

“Phone didn’t ring all day,” Bowleg said. “What’s ...”

“Hurry up! We know what Raymond did, but if we don’t get down to the creek fast they’ll destroy the evidence!”

Sandy didn’t wait any longer; he ran to their room—for the camera and reappeared, struggling to connect the flash attachment as he moved. Bowleg tore into the kitchen from the other door. He was making no effort to conceal his gun this time—he was strapping the cartridge-filled belt around his waist.

“Ma!” he barked. “Take my car and go for Chet.”

“We’ll be between the last tunnel and Raymond’s fence,” Ken said.

“And tell him to come ready for trouble.” Bowleg loosened the gun in its holster. He looked even smaller with the heavy weapon sagging low on his right hip, but there was nothing comical about him. His eyes were hard and slitted. He’d spent twenty years hoping for this opportunity. “What are we waiting for?”

Sandy drove rapidly toward the highway while Ken made some belated introductions and told Bowleg about the truck.

“They can’t be here yet,” Sandy said. “It would take them three minutes to get that big thing straightened out.” But he peered back up the highway cautiously before he ventured across.

When they turned onto Narrow Gauge Road, Sandy switched on the

parking lights and they crawled ahead, feeling, rather than seeing their way. Ken used this time to good advantage by telling Bowleg what they had learned during the afternoon. Bowleg answered by grunting; most of his attention was directed ahead.

Ken's father, in the back seat, explained what they were going to try to do with the camera.

"Don't need any camera," Bowleg said.

"Yes, we do!" Ken insisted. "Suppose you get into a fight and they manage to blow up the rock, anyway. Then where are we?"

"O.K." Bowleg agreed. "You take your picture first— then get out."

"Nothing doing." Richard Holt could also be definite when he wanted to. "You've been waiting for this moment a long time, but your revenge isn't as important as getting Wilson's land back. A gun fight might prejudice your case when it comes to court."

"Oh?" Bowleg wavered a little.

"Yes. We get our picture and run."

Bowleg didn't answer that one. "Pull over here and stop."

They had passed through the third tunnel and the last one was looming up twenty feet before them. Sandy pulled off the narrow road and parked on the shoulder, the right wheels about four feet from the edge of the ravine. When he shut the motor off, the noise of the tumbling water overcame all other sound. Sandy turned off the lights, took the key from the lock, and they got out.

"Wait a minute." Ken reopened the door and found the flashlight in the glove compartment. "We'll need this."

"No lights," Bowleg growled.

"Not to walk by," Ken explained, "but to attract their attention and make them look up so we can get their faces."

"Wait here," Bowleg commanded. "They may have set a guard."

He vanished into the blackness and materialized again suddenly. "All clear through the tunnel. Let's go —follow me."

They stumbled across the uneven, rock-littered floor, preferring to risk a tumble rather than turn on the flashlight. When they got out under the sky once more it seemed much lighter—almost bright by comparison.

Bowleg whispered. "To the right. Up to the ravine."

They went even more cautiously now. Not only was there danger of falling over the edge, but they were almost directly above the big rock in the water. Ahead of them, Bowleg stopped and waited until they were pressing against him. Then he moved forward again and they all looked down.

Fifty feet below them a dim light flickered fitfully to disclose three figures standing almost waist-deep in the swirling water. It was clear that they hadn't reached the spot any too soon. One man was holding

a long iron bar against the rock while the other was swinging a sledge. The third, Madden, the only one they recognized, was directing the work of drilling a hole in the rock. The hammer-wielder stopped and his helper withdrew the bar; the hole was already more than a foot deep. The men moved around and the guns on their hips were easily to be seen.

Ken drew his father and the others back from the edge. "I'll take the flashlight about twenty feet away and turn it on. When they look up, Sandy will take the picture. Then we run for the tunnel."

"No, you don't." Bowleg took the flashlight away from Ken. "Those men'll shoot first and ask questions later. I'll use the light." He turned toward Sandy. "Ready, son?"

Sandy cocked the shutter. "I'm set. This won't win any prizes, but —"

"As long as it wins a lawsuit, Sandy, it'll be fine." Richard Holt patted Sandy's shoulder. "O.K. Take it and step back fast."

They moved forward again and looked down—looked and waited for Bowleg. The sharp clink of hammer on steel reached them over the creek's rumbling—the men were drilling again. Sandy aimed his lens at the light and held his breath.

The flashlight stabbed a point of brilliance downward—found the men and held them impaled. They looked up startled.

"Who—?" Madden shouted.

That was the moment Sandy had been waiting for—he pressed the release and the bulb exploded, washing the entire ravine with hard, white light. Before they could step back out of range they saw Madden reach for his gun. There was a shot from where Bowleg was standing and the lantern down by the rock shattered. Simultaneously Bowleg switched off the flashlight and joined the three of them in a run for the tunnel.

Bowleg was chuckling happily. "Could 'a' got 'em easy, but I figured the lantern was more important."

They stumbled into the dark tunnel. Ken slipped and half fell to his knees but recovered without doing any more damage than scraping some skin off his hands.

"Take it easy, Ken." Richard Holt slowed down to a walk.

"Shh!" Ken stopped. "Hold it!"

When the scuffling of feet came to a halt, they all heard it—the slow throb of a heavy motor approaching.

"Look ahead!" Sandy gasped. "The truck!"

They could see it then, dimly. It was running without lights and approaching the mouth of the tunnel they were in.

"If they turn on their lights we're sunk," Holt said. "One group behind us and one ahead of us. We won't have a chance."

“And if they don’t turn on their lights,” Ken added, “we’re sunk, anyway. There isn’t enough room for us and that thing in this narrow tunnel.”

“Run for it—beat them to the opening!” Sandy began to sprint and they all joined him. But the truck had only fifty feet to go to the mouth of the tunnel; they had twice that distance to cover.

CHAPTER XXI

THE AFFAIR IN THE TUNNEL

They could see the bulk of the truck dimly outlined against the faint light from the starlit sky; they could hear it move forward in low speed—slowly, but already within twenty feet of the mouth of the tunnel.

And then it stopped, the motor's gruff throb covering up the noise of their skidding feet as they too halted their forward rush.

"They've seen our car," Sandy whispered.

They heard the doors of the truck open—first the right and then the left, and they heard feet on the metal running boards.

"This is our chance." Ken slid past Sandy and moved forward. "Keep it quiet."

When they reached the tunnel mouth they could hear the men returning. They were speaking in low voices, but snatches of words were understandable, and the voices were recognizable.

"They must ... sneaking ... rock ..." Smith said.

"Take truck through ... block ... in trap." King answered.

"No!" Smith's vehemence made him speak louder.

"They'll hear us coming. Well walk through and surprise them."

Ken turned his head to whisper. "Come on—follow me."

Another three feet which brought them out beneath the open sky, and then they turned toward the ravine. It took but a second to slip behind some boulders.

Smith and King had passed the truck and were stumbling toward the tunnel. They would pass within ten feet of where Ken's group crouched.

Bowleg, alongside of Ken, moved slightly. "This is our chance to get those two. Have you got the flash?"

Ken put his hand over the wrist holding the gun. "No! Let them get into the tunnel." His mouth was almost against Bowleg's ear and he kept his voice as low as possible, but even so he was afraid that the oncoming men might hear them. Bowleg struggled to free his hand, but Ken held on hard.

“Let go,” Bowleg grunted.

Sandy moved in quietly. He clamped one hand over Bowleg’s mouth and with his free arm enfolded the slight figure and lifted it off the ground. Bowleg struggled for an instant and then realized he was helpless and relaxed. They held him that way until Smith and King passed and their shuffling footsteps faded away.

“Good work, boys.” Richard Holt’s quietly spoken words ended a two-minute silence. “Let him go.”

Sandy released his grip, but kept on the alert should Bowleg make a break for the tunnel.

He needn’t have worried—the little Westerner was almost apoplectic with rage.

“Keep it quiet, Bowleg! Don’t be a fool!” Again Holt’s quiet authority was effective; Bowleg stopped ranting.

“Smith thinks we’re in that tunnel,” Ken said. “Mad-den’s gang will think so, too. You can’t see anything in there except a silhouette, so what’ll happen when those two groups hear each other?”

It didn’t take long for the meaning of Ken’s whisper to penetrate.

“Fireworks,” Bowleg breathed. There was a grin behind the word.

As if at a signal there was a crash of glass and the truck’s windshield shattered. A split second later the roar of the gun reached them from the depths of the tunnel. A bullet whined overhead and another blast of sound shot out of the cavern.

They peered over the rocks and watched the dull flashes. The firing slowed down after a half-dozen exchanges, and the sudden silence seemed overpowering.

“Now what?” Sandy asked. “Think they’re ...”

“Don’t think so,” Bowleg cut in. “There’s too many rocks in there to hide behind.”

“Maybe they’ve recognized each other,” Richard Holt said. “In that case, we’d better get ready.”

“I’ll confuse ‘em a mite.” Bowleg snaked forward to reach the level of the road. There was a flash from his gun, and after a second, two answering shots from the tunnel. A bullet knocked out the remaining glass of the windshield.

Ken’s father spoke up again. “We’ve got to get out of here. Sooner or later those men’ll find out they’re shooting at each other and not at us.”

In the tunnel a new outbreak of firing started, and the scream of ricocheting bullets mingled with the bellow of exploding gunpowder to make a hideous din.

Then, in a momentary lull, they could hear footsteps coming up from the rear—pounding footsteps.

Bowleg jerked into action. “It may be Chet—or it may be someone

on their side. I'll check."

He slid off into the darkness, keeping to the extreme side of the road, out of line with the tunnel from which firing had recommenced. He was back in no time, leading Chet and Tommy Wilson.

"Heard the shooting," Wilson said. "Left your car back a way and came a-running. What's going on?" he added.

"Plenty." Bowleg chuckled. "Some of Raymond's boys think we're in there. They're shooting each other up fine."

"But it won't last much longer," Ken cut in. "If some of us could get around to the other end of the tunnel, we'd have them locked in."

"I can get around." Tommy spoke up. "I know these rocks—I always climb around here."

"How long will it take?" Richard Holt asked.

"Five minutes, I guess."

"I'll go with you, Tommy," Bowleg said.

"I'll go," Wilson said. "I can take care of that end." He held up his right arm to show the rifle he carried. "I'll fire a shot when we get there."

"Then we'll turn on the truck lights and tell them to come out." Bowleg waited until the Wilsons had vanished. "When those lights hit the tunnel, nobody can get out either end unless we let 'em." He spoke to Ken. "When Chet lets loose, they'll be mixed up in there for a minute. Think you can get the lights on then real quick?"

"I'll take care of the lights, Ken."

Ken opened his mouth and shut it again. There wasn't much sense in arguing with Richard Holt when he'd made up his mind.

Bowleg and Holt drifted quietly off in opposite directions and the boys were left alone. The quiet was intense.

"Hope the Wilsons get to the other end before the men inside find out what—"

Gunfire drowned out Ken's voice. From Bowleg's vantage point just outside the tunnel and to one side of it, he had fired two shots in quick succession. But this time there was no answering fire from inside.

Instead a voice yelled, "Ow!"

Ken knew immediately that Smith had been hurt. And he wasn't the only one who identified the voice.

"Smith! That you?" From farther inside the tunnel another startled voice echoed.

The two groups had recognized each other.

Suddenly the flat crack of Wilson's rifle cut through the night. And before the noise had died away, the truck lights stabbed a brilliant hole into the darkness of the tunnel.

"Come on out!" Bowleg bellowed. "One by one, with your hands

up.”

The answer was a shot from the tunnel, and one of the truck lights exploded into fragments.

Bowleg shouted once more. “This is your last chance to come peaceable. Throw your guns out first.”

To emphasize this command, Wilson fired a shot into the tunnel from the other end. The bullet whined nastily as it bounced from the rock walls.

“O.K. You win.”

There was a slow shuffling of feet and then a pistol bounced on the rocky road. Three others followed it, and finally Smith appeared limping, his hands high in the air. King followed and behind him came the men who had been drilling the rock.

From deep in the tunnel they heard Wilson. “I’ve got them covered. What’ll we do with them now?”

“Where’s Madden?” Bowleg snapped at Smith.

“I don’t know,” he said sullenly. “He was down at the rock, wasn’t he?”

The man who’d been wielding the sledge spoke up. “He took off for the ranch to warn Raymond.

“Get them in the truck and ride herd on them!” Bowleg called to Wilson. “Raymond and Madden are getting away. I’m going after them.”

He sp’ in around and began to run back to his car.

“Wait!” Ken shouted after him. “Let the police catch them.”

Bowleg was out of sight, the noise of his progress already beginning to fade, when Ken sprinted after him. Sandy thrust the camera into Holt’s hands, and followed.

The engine was roaring by the time Ken reached the car. Bowleg jerked the gearshift lever into low and let the clutch out. The car lurched forward, turning in a tight circle. There was no time for discussion or persuasion; Ken leaped onto the running board a second before Sandy landed there. They hung on desperately while Bowleg pulled the bucking vehicle back onto the narrow road and headed for town. Ken crawled into the front seat and Sandy fell across the back one as the car ripped through the tunnel.

“Don’t try to stop me,” Bowleg warned. “One move from you and the car’ll go into the ravine.”

“If you want to get yourself shot,” Sandy said, “go ahead. But let us out.”

“No, you don’t.” Bowleg didn’t turn his head. “I’m wise to you. As soon as I slow this car up, you’ll grab me.”

Bowleg took the downgrade to town at full throttle and skidded around the corner into Main Street with scarcely any slackening of

speed. People on the street stared openmouthed as the old car rocketed toward the highway.

“Hope there’s no one coming,” Bowleg muttered. ” ‘Cause I’m not stopping.” He didn’t even slow down.

The hind end swung around crazily until the tires hit the pavement. Then the car straightened out with a lurch that almost turned them over. The boys hung on grimly, but nothing seemed to bother Bowleg at all. He was getting to the Crooked Y ranch as fast as possible.

Bowleg took the turn into the ranch lane with one tug at the wheel and flipped off his headlights at the same time. The light car bounced and tossed as it fought its way up the grade. There were lights on at the ranch house, but even as they watched, the points of illumination disappeared. An instant later the headlights of a car swept around in an arc and then pointed their way.

Bowleg drove on until he came to a place where the lane was cut between high banks before he jammed on the brakes. The motor coughed itself to death as the rear wheels locked. The car effectively blocked the road.

“Get out of the way.” Bowleg slid out of the seat. “Climb that bank and get in the field.” The oncoming lights picked out his slim figure. Ken and Sandy scrambled up the loose dirt and stretched out in the grass above, their eyes peering down.

Bowleg stood on the driver’s side of his car, huddled down slightly to keep out of sight. When the approaching car was several hundred feet distant, Bowleg reached out and snapped his headlights on. The other car—it was Raymond’s station wagon—skidded to a halt, its highly polished radiator about a hundred feet from the scarred, blunt nose of the older vehicle.

Behind the wheel of his car Raymond sat indecisive. Madden, beside him, turned to say something at which Raymond shook his head. Bowleg crouched, depending on the glare from his headlights and on his left front fender to keep him from sight

Madden spoke again, and Raymond put the car in gear and moved it up until it was within fifty feet of Bowleg. Both front doors opened simultaneously; Raymond and Madden leaped out on either side and scuttled toward the rear of the station wagon. Out of the glare of the lights each leaped for the bank on his side, and frantically they clawed their way upward. In the brief glance of Madden the boys managed to get, they saw that he had a gun in his hand.

A second later Raymond, on their side of the road, had flung himself over the top and flattened out in the grass not twenty feet from where they lay. Quietly the boys began to back into the darkness and the tall grass.

For a long slow minute there was silence except for the quiet idling

of the station wagon. Then there was a burst of flame and a roar from the spot where Madden had disappeared. Glass tinkled behind the lights of Bowleg's car. Another blast of sound ripped through the still air; Madden had fired again.

Bowleg's gun fired twice then, the two shots so close together that they sounded almost like one. There was a howl from the opposite bank.

"Come on down, Madden, or I'll do better than your hand the next time." Bowleg's voice was hard. "Your gun first. And hurry it up."

The boys heard a dull thud—the sound of a hard object striking the packed dirt of the road. Then they recognized the sounds of Madden's scrambling descent.

"Where's Raymond?" Bowleg demanded.

The boys came to with a jerk. They had forgotten Raymond for a moment. Now they listened for his heavy breathing and couldn't hear it. But they heard something else; the soft rustle of feet through the grass. The boys raised themselves up to look around, and then froze. Raymond was less than six feet away, the gun in his hand pointed directly at Sandy.

There wasn't time for stealth—there wasn't time for planning. With a convulsive motion Ken gathered his legs under him and launched himself at the menacing figure.

He struck Raymond above the knees with a force that would have toppled any football player Ken had ever faced. But Raymond was too heavy. He didn't go down and he didn't drop the gun.

Ken clawed at the man's shirt, trying to get himself up. Raymond brought up his knee and Ken was thrown off, his lungs crying for air. The momentary diversion Ken had created was all Sandy needed—that, and the rage that filled him at the sight of Raymond's kick. Disregarding the wavering gun, he drove his two hundred pounds at the man in a flying tackle. This time Raymond dropped, the gun firing into the air as the two bodies crashed to earth. Raymond rolled free of Sandy's imprisoning arms and got to his knees, but before he could bring the weapon to bear, Sandy chopped at the extended wrist with the side of his hand. The gun flew wide.

With a swipe of his long arms Sandy encompassed Raymond's knees and pulled the man down on top of him. Raymond scrambled free, but Sandy was after him without pause. Again they fell, this time on the edge of the bank. They fought there for an instant, and then, clawing wildly at each other, they rolled down the embankment into the glare of light between the two cars.

Sandy was on his feet first, his chest heaving as he gulped up air. Raymond rolled over, and his outflung right hand closed on the gun Madden had dropped.

“Look out, Sandy!” Ken gasped. He was kneeling at the edge of the bank, still fighting to catch his breath. Raymond was already pulling himself up.

There was a bellow of noise from Bowleg’s gun and a puff of dust exploded at Raymond’s side. “Drop it!”

The big rancher stood immobile for a split second. Sandy leaped in again, his hands closing on the man’s right arm and twisting it. Raymond went over on his face. The gun fell. Sandy let go and hauled him to his feet in one mighty lunge. They faced each other in the harsh light while Ken, Bowleg, and the injured Madden looked on.

“Had enough?” Bowleg asked.

Raymond answered by driving a terrific blow at Sandy’s head. The boy ducked it and drove his own right forward in a stiff jab. Raymond backed up and turned to run for the safety of the darkness. He didn’t take more than two steps before Sandy was on him once more. He swung Raymond around, rocked him with a pile-driver punch to the overplump stomach, and followed it with another to the jaw. Raymond struck back, but his blows lacked strength. He took another blow high on his face and still another on the jaw. Then he staggered and went to his knees with Sandy standing over him.

“That’s enough.” This time Bowleg wasn’t asking a question. He was making a statement.

“I’ll buy that.” Richard Holt spoke from the fringe of darkness behind Bowleg’s car.

Ken and Sandy looked in that direction but Bowleg kept his eyes warily on Madden and on Raymond.

They saw then that another car had approached unnoticed in the heat of the battle, and that Wilson and Tommy were standing with Ken’s father.

Ken slid down the bank and hastened to Sandy. “You all right?”

Sandy looked down and seemed surprised to find that his hands were still tightened into fists. “Sure. How about you? That knee ...”

“I got my wind back.” Ken grinned. “Most of it, anyway.”

“Let’s not stand around here all night,” Bow leg snapped. “Let’s get these two back with their friends.”

CHAPTER XXII

CELEBRATION

A loud report directly outside their window brought Ken and Sandy awake in a rush; the memory of the gunfire of the night before was still fresh in their minds. They looked at the window and then sheepishly at each other.

"Battle fatigue, I guess." Sandy leaned over and picked the blanket off the floor. "What time is it?" He yawned.

Ken scratched his head sleepily and cocked one half-opened eye at the clock. Then he opened both eyes wide and jumped out of bed. "It's half past three!"

Sandy spoke through another yawn. "What made that noise?"

Ken looked out. "Hey! What goes on here?"

Sandy joined him at the window and whistled. "Looks like we're being invaded."

The truck which had backfired outside their window had by now backed up to the center of the court where a bonfire was burning. From the rear of the truck two men were tossing down dozens of logs which other men were throwing on the fire. Still another crew was wielding rakes and hoes and smoothing the thick bed of red embers to receive the new fuel.

Three women were stirring some sort of mixture in brand-new washtubs—stopping now and then to dip up small spoonfuls of the thick substance and taste it. A trestle table near by was filled with cartons and packages and heaps of lemons.

A jeep tore around the corner of the inn, skidding to a halt with the front wheels almost in the fire. Two men jumped out and began to erect heavy log tripod supports at both ends of the oval bed of coals. Still another car drove up—Wilson's old jalopy—and out of it came Tommy and his parents. At the sight of Mrs. Wilson, both Ken and Sandy gulped.

She seemed to have shed twenty years since the last time they had seen her. She wore a new dress, and it looked as if she'd had her hair curled, but what startled the boys was her expression and the way she

walked.

“Look at her,” Ken said quietly. “She’s smiling.”

“Yes. And no more hunched shoulders,” Sandy added.

Wilson and Tommy were dressed as always, but they too seemed to walk more erectly, and Wilson’s usually grim face was creased in a wide smile. He opened the rear door of the car and hauled out what seemed to be half a beef. When that had been dropped on the table, he removed another slab equal in size.

“Barbecue!” Sandy shouted. “That’s what this is. They’re celebrating!”

“And why not?” The voice came from behind them— Ken’s father had come into their room through the connecting bath.

“We’d better get dressed,” Ken said.

“You’re not kidding.” Sandy began to strip. “We have to eat breakfast in a hurry so we can get hungry in time for the party.”

Mr. Holt laughed. “No rush. That meat won’t be ready until about eight o’clock.”

The boys dashed for the shower, with Ken making it a split second ahead of Sandy. Half an hour later they were at the big table in the kitchen, with Ma clucking around them like a hen. There was a huge pot of coffee on the stove, and one by one Bowleg, Chet Wilson, Tommy, Holt, and finally Hank Banner drifted in while the boys ate.

“I give up,” Sandy said finally. “Ma, you win—you can cook faster than I can eat.”

“It was touch and go there for a minute,” Bowleg said, grinning. “But I’d bet on Ma any day.”

“That’s all you get,” Ma said, “until someone tells me what happened.”

Banner pulled a newspaper out of his pocket and tossed it across the table with a self-conscious smile. “There it is. Of course this is only a news flash—Mr. Holt’s feature story will have all the dope.”

There were three pictures on the first page, and a two-column story with a by-line crediting it to Henry Banner. Banner had arrived at Mesa Alta about midnight, bringing with him a photographer who had popped flash bulbs at practically everybody and everything in sight. One of the pictures showed Ken and Sandy standing with Wilson and Bowleg. The second was a reproduction of the picture Sandy had taken of the men drilling the rock. The third was a group picture showing Raymond, Madden, Smith, King, and the others entering the county jail in custody of the sheriff.

Ken grinned and pointed to the bottom of the picture Sandy had taken. “Look what it says.”

“Well, what do you know?” Sandy read the line aloud. “Photo by Sandy Allen, Global News.”

"There'll be a nice check in the mail for you for that one," Richard Holt said.

"Now wait a minute," Sandy protested. "Since when do / get checks for something *we* did?"

"Don't worry. There'll be another check for the two of you. You can split it all up evenly if you want to."

Sandy relaxed. "That's more like it."

Bowleg chuckled. "Always figured me and Chet were about the best friends in the world. But it looks like we've got competition now."

Ma broke in. "I don't want to seem monotonous, but what happened?"

"Well, let's see." Holt lighted a cigarette. "After Sandy and Raymond stopped playing around, we got the gang together and held them in the movie house until the sheriff got here with warrants."

"What was the connection between Burton and Raymond?" Ma refilled the coffee cups.

"Just about what the boys figured out," Holt said. "When Burton was fired he made up his mind to get even. Remember he was a blaster—he'd worked on the tunnels and he knew more about the rocks than anyone around here. He saw that there were two rocks that might pass for Elephant Rock, and he figured out how to change the real one so that it would no longer look like an elephant.

"But the two rocks aren't very far apart," Ma said. "How could that make so much difference in the boundary?"

"That was the smart part of his plan." Chet pulled a stub of pencil from his pocket and drew a rough map on a paper napkin. "See, the real boundary is a line running from the Needle to the Elephant and continuing in a straight line for about a mile. If you move Elephant Rock a hundred feet to the right, the whole line swings at an angle and at the end it's moved over a thousand feet."

"It's like an unbalanced seesaw," Ken said. "The short end only moves a little bit, but the long end moves a lot."

"And that was enough to cut Chet out of the water rights," Bowleg said.

"And Davis and Brown too, don't forget," Wilson added. "He picked up their land for a song because it wasn't worth much without water."

"But the really smart thing was the way they planned it a long time in advance," Holt continued. "They knew that Wright was a pretty old man with no family—sooner or later he'd die and the ranch could be bought in." He ground out his cigarette in an ash tray. "This is the way it shaped up. Burton drifted down to Mud Flat after he was fired. He joined up with Riegel—or Raymond—and Madden and told them his idea. They came to terms and one night they came up here and Burton, the expert blaster, blew the head off Elephant Rock with a

minimum of noise. He just toppled it off and let it fall in the creek.”

“Then they went back to Mud Flat and waited, huh?” Ken asked.

“Not quite,” Holt said. “They got hold of Charles Jackson, the local lawyer, and convinced him that it would pay to join them. He’s the one who kept an eye on the Wright place and made sure they got the first chance to buy it when Wright died.”

“And he’s the one my father hired to fight the case,” Wilson added. “Jackson convinced him that the only chance was to try to prove that the ranches should share the water because they always had in the past. *That kept anybody from looking too closely at Elephant Rock.*”

“And don’t forget,” Bowleg said, “that more than three years had gone by since Burton fixed the rock. Hardly anybody ever bothered to look at it, and who could have proved that we were using the wrong one?”

“You could have seen it from the old pictures,” Sandy said. “Just like we did.”

“Sure,” Wilson agreed. “If we’d had the sense to look. But with Jackson fighting the case ...”

“So when I wrote to Raymond and Chet about doing this story,” Holt continued, “Raymond got busy to destroy whatever evidence there may have been. He had Smith—who’d been a partner of his in other deals—go through the old newspaper files and destroy those pictures. Then he planted Smith here as a guest to keep an eye on you.”

“Keep an ear on us, you mean,” Sandy said, thinking of the tapped telephone wires. “By the way,” he asked suddenly, “why didn’t you answer the telephone yesterday?”

“The wires were cut,” Bowleg said laconically. “Raymond thought of everything.”

“But not of those attempts to get rid of you boys,” Richard Holt pointed out. “Smith’ll stand that charge alone.”

“It wasn’t charity on Raymond’s part,” Banner spoke up. “He was just too smart. He knew that if something happened to the boys there’d be a thorough investigation.”

“What about the ranch? What happens now?” Ken wanted to know.

They all looked at Wilson for an answer. As they waited, the door opened and Mrs. Wilson entered.

They all stood up. “Looking mighty pretty, Mildred,” Bowleg said.

She blushed. “I just wanted to ...” She stopped talking and walked around the table to Ken, gave him a hug and kissed his cheek and then did the same for Sandy. They blushed then, too.

“I couldn’t say it,” she explained, as she stood beside her husband. “But that’ll tell you what I mean.”

“I don’t think thanks are necessary, Mrs. Wilson.” Ken’s father

smiled. "Chet was going to tell us ..."

"Huh?" Wilson was looking at his wife. "Oh, yes. I saw a lawyer this morning." He grinned. "Not one like Jackson. He went over the case with me and it's like this: Raymond got title to the disputed land through fraud, so he doesn't have any title at all. We're going to sue for damages and loss of land use for twenty years. We're going to try and find Davis and Brown, too, because they have a claim against Raymond as well as I have. The lawyer said that there was no doubt we'd win and that the Crooked Y would have to be sold to pay our claims. He suggested that we might take the ranch over in settlement." He sighed. "It'll take a little while, I guess, but we've waited long enough not to worry about another couple of months."

"Bowleg's going to be our foreman," Tommy said proudly.

"He'll be a lot more than that, son," Wilson said quietly. "He can be anything he wants to be, or have anything we've got."

"Shucks!" Bowleg fidgeted. "I don't want anything."

"How about these?" Ma shoved a plate of hot biscuits in front of him.

"That's different!" Bowleg stuffed one in his mouth.

A stranger appeared in the doorway. "We're ready to spit the beef, Chet. Want to do it?"

"Pshaw!" Ma turned on him. "What do you men know about barbecuing a beef?" She brushed past them and walked outside, leaving the Wilsons and Bowleg to follow.

Banner stretched and yawned. "I'm going to catch a little nap before the festivities begin." He spoke to Richard Holt. "What are you going to do? Take off for New York right after you finish your story?"

"Not me! I'm taking a vacation—I'm going to fish and eat and sleep, and eat and sleep and eat and sleep."

Ken laughed. "Sometimes you sound more like Sandy than Sandy does."

"And what's wrong with that?" Sandy wanted to know. "I used to get a lot of sleep before I met up with you. Sometimes I miss the peace and quiet of Brentwood—nothing ever happens there." He grinned at Ken as he said, "For the next month I'm not doing anything for anybody—and that includes you."

Ken smiled back at him. "You could be wrong, you know."

Sandy was wrong. For at that very moment events were shaping up that were going to shatter the peace and quiet of Brentwood, and involve Ken and Sandy in some of their most dangerous adventures as they solve *The Black Thumb Mystery*.

THE END

of The Riddle of the Stone Elephant
by Bruce Campbell
Ken Holt no. 2